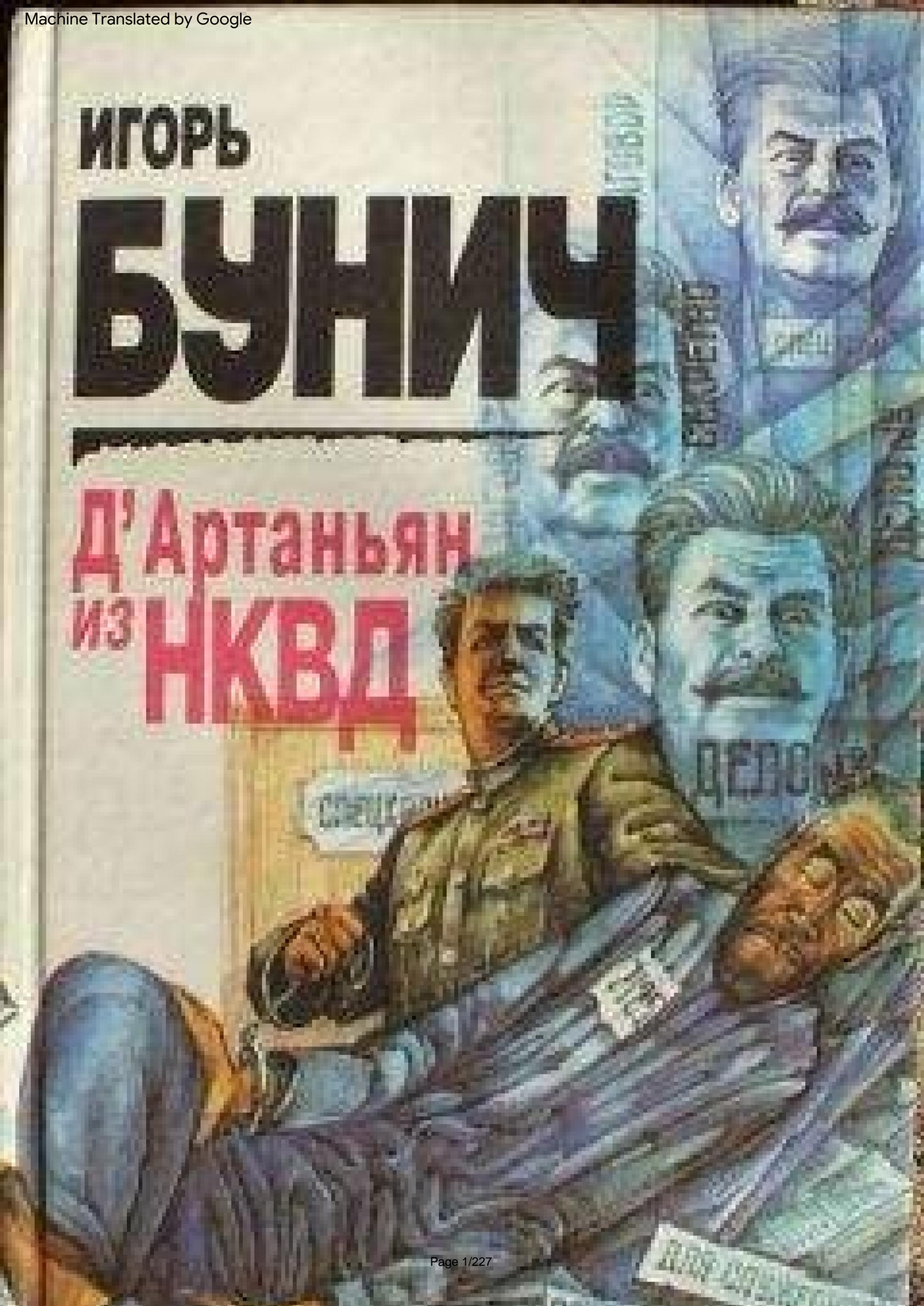


ИГОРЬ

# БУНИЧ

Д'Артаньян  
из НКВД



Igor Bunich

D'Artagnan of the NKVD: Historical Anecdotes

## FOREWORD

Before bringing to the attention of readers the memoirs of retired Colonel of State Security Vasily Lukich No. \*\*\*, we consider it necessary to make a few preliminary clarifications.

The first and most important thing is that Vasily Lukich never wrote any memoirs, except for the book "With the Party in the Heart", which never saw the light of day, which the political department of the Lubyanka tried to publish under his name, promising to increase the pension. But even this book was not passed by the censors.

Vasily Lukich could not write anything, because in the depths of his department lies an obligation signed by him never and under no circumstances to write memoirs. That is why everything contained in this book is a processing of the verbal stories of a veteran, recorded by me, Igor Bunich, who bears all responsibility for their content and veracity.

Therefore, the surname of Vasily Lukich is not mentioned anywhere in the book, but only the name that is genuine sounds.

An inexperienced reader may have doubts about the authenticity of some of the stories of Vasily Lukich, and something, perhaps, will cause a sharp rejection. For example, I did not fully understand the veteran's statement that Lenin is "eternally alive", and accepted this formulation as an axiom. But, nevertheless, I want to warn readers: do not rush to criticize!

In the stories of Vasily Lukich, there is no less authenticity, and perhaps even more, than that of any other Chekist who has hit his memories.

It is enough to review their memoirs published over the past 70 years to be convinced of this. Look through at least the last of the published books written by Generals Sudoplatov, Kalugin and Bobkov to make sure of this.

What, for example, is the poisonous umbrella described by Kalugin, specially created to eliminate dissidents, especially when you consider that there was no umbrella. What are the tons of secret and top-secret American documents obtained by Kalugin's service, the recruitment of various Ames and Lipoks worth, if as a result of this titanic activity, not the United States, but the Soviet Union crumbled. Is there any doubt about the authenticity of the memories? I'm afraid so.

What are the statements of General Bobkov that, having come to the authorities in 1946, "he did not find the period when thousands of people were subjected to illegal arrests, and the best representatives of the intelligentsia were rotting in prisons and camps."

Is this true? Who then were those hundreds of thousands of living political prisoners,

rehabilitated ten years later by Khrushchev?

Unlike them, Vasily Lukich caught all periods, knew everything and does not lie, like Sudoplatov, that, while serving in the central apparatus of the MGB, he had no idea either about the "Leningrad case" or about the "Doctors' Case". So another question is who of them is more truthful - all of the above or Vasily Lukich?

Perhaps Vasily Lukich can only be reproached for the fact that he still hides some part of the truth. He hides now - he will tell in the future, because the truth cannot be hidden.

Since 1917 and to this day, the government has been fenced off from the country by an impenetrable wall of secrecy. No one was allowed into the archives, no one is allowed in, and gradually these archives are being slowly destroyed.

Until now, instead of clear and precise answers to the key questions of our history, either conjectures or myths crudely worked out in the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the CPSU have been offered.

Who brought the Bolsheviks to power and why?

What is the fate of the royal family?

What happened to Lenin in January 1924?

- By whose order was Kirov killed?

How did the disaster on June 22, 1941 happen?

— What happened to Stalin himself in February 1953?

- What happened to Lavrenty Beria a year later?

- How many of the two million "spies" destroyed by SMERSH were innocent victims?

- Who blew up the battleship Novorossiysk?

- Who published Solzhenitsyn abroad and inspired him with books from the USSR?

— Who provoked the massacre in Vilnius? In Sumgayit? In Baku? In Tbilisi?

- Who organized the channels for the leakage of party money abroad?

— Who initiated and unleashed the Chechen war?

- Who finances the "thrifty" election campaigns of the current Zyuganovs?

These are just a few of hundreds of thousands of questions, most of which have been drowning in whirlpools of mutually exclusive versions for decades. And there are no answers!

Several generations of historians continue to build their hypotheses on the age-old premise "Why does a goat need a button accordion?". That is why Vasily Lukich inevitably had to appear, who, with his ingenuous, simple stories, tried to eliminate - to the best of his understanding of events - several blank spots in our history, distorted by three generations of communist pisuns.

Fate was favorable to Vasily Lukich. Having come to the Cheka even under the "iron" Felix Dzerzhinsky, he served in the state security personnel until 1955. He managed to finish the higher school of the MGB - the "academy", as he calls it, and defend his dissertation. After leaving

organs, is listed in the "reserve".

Vasily Lukich was used by the Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov and Gorbachev authorities to carry out so-called "delicate" operations and for parallel investigations, although in 1964 he finally retired, switching to a teaching job at Moscow State University.

The last documented fact of bringing Vasily Lukich to the KGB "for consultations" dates back to July 1991. Currently, Vasily Lukich lives in Moscow, willingly accepting former colleagues and current employees of the current bodies.

We publish only a part of his stories. There are far more of them than could fit into a small book.

It was extremely difficult to get Vassily Lukich to talk, more difficult to get him to read what he had told, and it seemed completely unbelievable that this book would be published without the risk of being accused of slander. But we managed to break through all the obstacles.

The main thing is to hear the stories of Vasily Lukich, and to believe them or not is a matter of taste. It all depends on the views and degree of self-awareness.

Vasily Lukich is happy to take part in any fruitful discussion about the veracity of his sincere recollections.

## ZONE OF SPECIAL PURPOSE

We are walking, stepping over construction debris, among the dilapidated buildings of an ancient monastery. It was founded almost in the sixteenth century. Later, there was probably the darkest monastery prison in Russia. After the seventeenth year, the strong walls and isolated position of the monastery attracted the attention of the NKVD. Now they remembered that this historical monument of Ancient Rus' is a good source of obtaining currency.

- Somewhere it was published, - I say, - that during the war there was some kind of SMERSH center and something like a school for saboteurs.

- This is during the war, - agrees Vasily Lukich (that is the name of my companion). - SMERSH came here in the forty-second year, and the object was liquidated shortly after the start of the war.

What does liquidated mean? I'm interested. Have you evacuated somewhere?

Vassily Lukich was silent for a while.

"A dark story," he sighs heavily. "I can't really tell you anything. But to meet with the people with whom I served at the facility, I was no longer given. Somehow I came across one account card. One comrade was in charge of our household: food, clothing allowance, and so on. So in the card there is a mark: he died during the performance of a combat mission in October of the forty-first year. Formulation, you know. In our country, in the fifty-third, half of the management was shot under such.

— And how are you? I ask not too tactfully.

- Lucky, - says Vasily Lukich, - in the fortieth, they sent me to study, and there was a war. I worked in the occupied territory for almost the entire war. Was wounded, on the Bolshaya



I was evacuated by plane. The year was in the hospital. Forgotten, in general, about me, thank God.

"So you say that in 1941 everyone was shot here. And his? - I look at Vasily Lukich with a clear expression of distrust.

- His? asks Vasily Lukich. - If all, then his, of course. What surprises you? Who needed him if he was still alive. Although in the fortieth he was still alive and well. He was just seventy. I personally congratulated him, - Seeing the expression on my face, he laughs. - Don't believe me? Well, whatever you want. Let's move on. See that body? We called it "special block-2". It's official. And among themselves they called it the "Kremlin". There were no grids. Reinforced glass. They had a great life here. Their allowance was four rubles a day. Toilet bowl in each cell. They took me to the bath one by one. Alexandra Fedorovna even had a piano...

- At Alexandra Feodorovna's? I ask stupidly.

- Well, yes, - continues Vasily Lukich, - at Alexandra Feodorovna's - the wife of the last Tsar Nicholas. True, she had already died in the thirty-first year. Those who were dying, we buried them nearby.

"Did the king also sit here?" - I look with a grin into the gray eyes of the old Chekist.

No, there was no king. I won't lie," Vasily Lukich answers, "the tsar, it seems, was really slapped in Yekaterinburg. Although Alexandra Fedorovna wrote letters to him all the time and handed them to me.

Did they have the right to correspondence? I wonder.

"Of course not," Vassily Lukich looks at me like I'm an idiot, "but they weren't told that. All letters in a special package were sent to the people's commissar once a quarter.

Did he write letters?

"Not enough," said Vassily Lukich, as if remembering something. - He wrote two or three letters for all the time, But he sat on a special regime with us. He didn't need a lot of paper. Read - please, write - no. And he wrote so much in his life. All his books were in his cell: both the first and the second edition.

- When was it delivered to you? - I decided to find out everything to the end.

- Delivered? Vassily Lukich thought for a moment. - I'll tell you now. So, I myself arrived at the facility in December the twenty-fourth, December fifteenth, And it was delivered, so as not to lie, in March the twenty-fifth. Exactly, The day after Women's Day, the ninth of March. Eh, the memory is still nothing, it works!

"Where has he been kept since January 24?" I wonder, trying to bring Vasily Lukich to clean water.

"Even longer," Vasily Lukich agrees. - They took him back in May of the twenty-third. For a long time, very different questions were clarified about the conspiracy. How is it...?

— Masonic? I suggest.

- No no. Somehow differently, - Vasily Lukich wrinkles his high forehead.

- Zionist? I'm trying to help.

"No," Vassily Lukich waves angrily. - The ego was now invented by smart people. I'll tell you now. Something connected with the general lumpenization of humanity. When I studied at the academy, I carefully found out about these same lumpens. They are like parasites who think a lot about themselves and hate anyone who produces at least something. And somewhere in the middle of the twenties, they began to be identified, from the proletarians they were chopped off and destroyed. Here, of course, Stalin's great merit. He was the first to realize that something was wrong here. That the leader of the world proletariat turned out to be the leader of the international lumpen conspiracy. And he tried to identify and destroy all this brethren. Another thing is that he did not succeed.

- Did they explain everything to you at the academy? I admired.

"Well, what is it?" Vassily Lukich scowled. Is that what they teach at the academy? It was he who told me everything.

- Myself?! I stopped in horror.

Vasily Lukich laughed.

- I was the commandant of the Kremlin. The only one who had the right to enter any cell. He told me many things.

"It means that he told you so: they say, I am not the leader of the world proletariat, but the leader of the international lumpen gang. And well done Stalin for exposing me. So what?

"You know," Vassily Lukich sighed, "take everything out for you and put it in." Everything is much more complicated. They did not come to us in iron masks. Everything is as it should be: with accompanying documents, with certificates, with extracts from cases, with individual instructions. Where do you think they got it?

I shrugged.

- Don't know. Probably in Gorki.

- In Gorki! Vassily Lukich patted me condescendingly on the back. "Not in Gorki, dear comrade, but in Pretoria. And he fled there back in the twenty-first after the Kronstadt uprising, transferring all the property of the republic to his own account. It used to happen," Vasily Lukich continued, "when you go into his cell, he throws his head up like this from a book (usually he read himself, wrote something out) and said: "Comrade, are you a member of the party?" And I have a party experience, you know, from the age of seventeen. "Then listen, comrade," he says, "how well written it is." And he reads: "Thousands of forms and methods of practical accounting and control over the rich, crooks and parasites must be developed and tested in practice. In one place, a dozen rich people, a dozen crooks, half a dozen workers who shirk from work will be imprisoned. In the other, they will put them to clean toilets. In the third, they will provide them with yellow tickets after the departure of the punishment cell, so that all the people will supervise them as harmful people. In the fourth, one of the ten guilty of parasitism will be shot on the spot ... "And he looks at me, narrowing his eyes: they say, what is it like? Whether I appreciate it or not.

And I usually say to him: "You, citizen, rather than read these hackneyed truths, which even without you are drummed into us at political classes every day, it would be better if the loot were returned to the people. Maybe you should reconsider the deadline." Although he had no time limit, of course. In fact, it was written: "Keep forever." This means - without a term, for life.

Then he starts running around the cell, gesticulating with his hand. Then he stops, thumbs on his vest, looks up at me and almost shouts: "Money, comrade, the people don't need it. The world bourgeoisie needs money to exploit the people. And the people need conscious freedom. And that's why I won't give you a dime." And shows me the muzzle. I'm his everything

tried to calm down. "There is no need," I say, "to get so excited, citizen. You already had two strokes." This is where he really got pissed off. "Slander," he shouts, "an evil slander invented to hide me in the mausoleum!" He was very afraid of the mausoleum ... He was so afraid that I sometimes used it. "Don't make a noise, they say, citizen, otherwise I will send you to the mausoleum." Scarecrow, like a punishment cell, although it was forbidden to put him in a punishment cell according to the instructions. He even threw himself up: "To me," he says, "all the comrades from the Politburo solemnly promised. Felix Edmundovich himself gave a guarantee!" Well, I'm joking: "When, they say, did they give you such a guarantee?" And he: "I assure you, comrade. I was abroad when they announced that I had a stroke. I documented this! within the framework of party discipline, they gathered a council of doctors, and they, imagine, announce: there was a stroke, and that's it. shitty NEP, smelly lumpens! Then they began to whisper something to each other, and Felix Edmundovich then said: you, they say, need to rest. Lie down in the mausoleum for a while, calm down, and then we'll talk. Then I could not stand it, gave them a number bills: choke! Then they gave a guarantee and brought here. "

I remember that in the thirty-second bath was built. He was worried about what we were building. Is it a mausoleum?

- Did anyone visit your pets? I asked.

"They did," Vassily Lukich said, lowering his voice. - Iosif Vissarionovich came three times. But not to Him.

- And to whom?

- Tell you everything.

"So," I couldn't help it, "when His first stroke was announced, he had already fled abroad. Then who lived in Gorki, who appeared at Comintern gatherings, and so on?

"A naive generation," Vasily Lukich laughs, "they believe in everything they are told. After the 21st year, wherever possible, Wolf Holshtok was thrust. Was such an adventurer. He didn't even know how to speak Russian.

"You've got me completely confused," I admitted. - But what is not clear to you in this story?

"The thing is," Vassily Lukich said thoughtfully, "that Wolf Holshtok was slapped in January 24. His brother Meir was picked up in Pretoria in the twenty-third and delivered to us.

"Yes," I agreed. - What don't you understand?

Who is in the mausoleum? Vassily Lukich grunted and spread his arms.

- Maybe there was a third brag? I suggested.

"I sometimes think so too," Vasily Lukich admitted, "Maybe he was, but he was never caught. This is exactly what I'm telling you.

- That's why they put it in the mausoleum, because they couldn't catch it. As a mark of respect, I guessed.

"Then how did he get to us?" Vasily Lukich did not let up. - After the mausoleum, or what? Something is not right with us.

— Maybe he was sent to you after the mausoleum? I scoffed.

"You're all joking," Vassily Lukich took offense. - And I'll tell you this: he himself told me that when he dies, he wants to be buried next to his mother at the Volkovo cemetery in Leningrad. But since Wolf had already been buried there, he was just afraid that he would be thrust into the mausoleum.

- When did he tell you? - I already thought badly.

- I often spoke. In the thirty-eighth he spoke later. Are dates really that important?

"But, Vassily Lukich! I pleaded. - The mausoleum has existed since the twenty-fourth year!

You might think that I don't know! snapped the Chekist-veteran. That's why I'm asking: WHO IS THERE?

"Lenin lies there," I yelled. Lenin Vladimir Ilyich!

On the face of Vassily Lukich, an expression of long-suffering teacher appeared in a conversation with a silly schoolboy.

"Well, how could he get there," he asked softly, "if Ilyich was still alive in the fortieth year, and the one you apparently mean was killed while crossing the border in the twenty-first?"

And then I understood everything.

"Are you saying that he escaped and could not be found?" I asked, trembling at the opening me the truth.

"Yes, yes," Vassily Lukich confirmed. "He was not caught, I know for sure.

So he ran to you. Was it hard to guess? It was the only place where he had a chance not to be killed and to write another ten volumes of his works, which were published last year. Felix wrote an escort to him, after which he himself was liquidated. Of course they couldn't find him.

"Yes, apparently so," thought Vassily Lukich. - It turns out that we got a real slap. I suspected as much, to be honest. The real surname in such forms is not written.

What was written on his form? I thought to ask.

- Like what? Vassily Lukich even stopped. - So it was written: "Lenin (Ulyanov) Vladimir Ilyich." Only no one believed - everyone knew that Lenin was in the mausoleum. Cunningly, of course, came up with. Don't say anything! But who did they hide in the mausoleum anyway?

Or maybe it was the other way around?

"Perhaps it was," Lukich agreed wearily. - So polluted the brains of everyone that they can't understand anything. There was no third brother. There were only two of them. I don't understand why they put them in the mausoleum, but the real one was slammed here?

— Come on, Lukich! I couldn't resist. "None of them were placed in the mausoleum. There is a wax doll there. Now every student knows this.

"And you know," Vasily Lukich said after some thought, "if you're not lying, then everything falls into place." And most importantly, I was right - there was no third brother!

"There was a third brother," I revealed another secret to him, "but he was killed by falling from an armored car.



"You keep snickering," Lukich sighed wearily, "but we believed in him!"

- How could you believe in him if he was sitting with you? I got angry.

"I didn't believe in the one that was sitting with me," whispered Lukich. - I believed in the one who lies in the mausoleum. And you say: doll!

## MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE

Once I asked Vasily Lukich a question that had been on my mind for a long time, but since it concerned, so to speak, the veteran's personal life, it seemed inconvenient for me to ask it.

Finally I made up my mind.

"Vasily Lukich," I asked, "were you married?" Family, do you have children?

- Why was it? - Vasily Lukich answered somewhat embarrassed, - I seem to be married now.

He rummaged through his desk drawer and pulled out an old marriage certificate. I looked into it, sighed and handed it to me.

I took the certificate, opened it and read that on August 18, 1930, the Civil Status Department of the Krasnopresnensky District of Moscow registered the marriage of Vasily Lukich with citizen Braun Eva Frantsevna, born in 1912.

At first, I didn't have any associations.

I just asked:

- Is she alive now?

"She seems to be alive," Lukich shrugged his shoulders, "she just left somewhere abroad. In 1948, she was given a term for bigamy. She managed to get married for the second time without divorcing me.

I realized that in the personal life of the old security officer there are no less secrets than in his official activities.

— And how did you meet her? I asked, "did she also work in the NKVD?"

"It was back in the days of the OGPU," Lukich shook his head, "and we met with her ...

He paused, smiled somehow strangely, cleared his throat and said:

"Yes, we didn't meet at all.

- How did you not meet? - I did not believe - how did you get married?

"And this is how we got married," replied Vassily Lukich, still smiling. - Somehow in August 1930, Vyacheslav Rudolfovich personally calls me to himself ...

- Who is this Vyacheslav Rudolfovich? I flashed my greyiness.

— Historian! - exclaimed Lukich, - you write books, but you don't know who Vyacheslav is

Rudolfovich! Vyacheslav Rudolfovich is Comrade Menzhinsky.

"Ah," I drawled, "that means you, Lukich, were summoned by Menzhinsky personally?"

- Can you imagine? Lukich pointed his finger at the ceiling, "the chairman of the OGPU himself!" I polished my boots for two hours, then I went in to him, neither alive nor dead.

And Vyacheslav Rudolfovich smiled, greeted me by the hand. "Sit down, says Vasily Lukich. How is the service going? How are your wards in the zone? Are there any problems?"

I answer that everything is fine, the wards are sitting quietly, and the problems, if they arise, are minor. We solve them ourselves. We do not worry about the authorities for nothing.

I tell him all this, but I myself feel that Comrade Menzhinsky called me for the wrong reason to find out what problems I have in my special zone with my wards. He needed me for something else. Vyacheslav Rudolfovich listens to me somehow absent-mindedly.

"I know that you have done well, Vasily Lukich," he says, "you know and understand our service. Even Comrade Yagoda himself will not praise you enough. You have only one shortcoming, dear comrade. You are a bachelor. And after all guy modicum where! Why did it happen so?"

I did not expect such a turn in our conversation, but I answer:

"Because he made a vow, Comrade Menzhinsky, not to start a family until the final victory of labor over capital.

"That's good," agrees Comrade Menzhinsky, "it's our common goal to which we must strive. But at this historical stage, our party sets a more specific task for the country and the people: building socialism in a single zone, that is, I wanted to say, of course, in a single country. I made a reservation, because, as you well understand, Lukich, the methods that you and your comrades developed in the experimental zones will be taken as a model. But to achieve our main, not intermediate goal, you would need to get married, brother.

- Yes, I have no one, - I answer, - I don't even have a clue, Vyacheslav Rudolfovich. There was one girl in the village, and she had already died of hunger for two years.

"It's wonderful," Comrade Menzhinsky rubs his hands happily, "it's just wonderful that you don't have anyone. Vasily Lukich. Because the party has chosen a bride for you, and personally I will be your witness at the conclusion, so to speak, of a legal marriage.

This is where I got really dumbfounded.

"The bride was chosen for me. I ask. - what for?"

"Don't ask questions, Lukich," Comrade Menzhinsky replies sternly, "it's necessary for the good of our cause."

So, where is she, this bride? I ask, although I understand that arguing and objecting is useless.

"Now I'll show it to you," Comrade Menzhinsky says and takes out a folder with the inscription "Top Secret Information of Special Importance." He opens the folder and takes out a postcard-sized photograph.

"Here," he says, "take a look. This is your bride.

I take a card, I look - on it is a girl of eighteen years old. Blond hair, wide smile. So, wow. Very pretty too. It even seemed to me that I saw her somewhere in a magazine among our heroic pilots.

Is she not a pilot? I ask.

"Fortunately, no," replies Comrade Menzhinsky. - I would say that, rather, even the opposite. Well, did you like it, Lukic?

"Nothing," I say, "pretty."

- Do you agree to marry? he asks.

"Well, if you have to," I answer, "what can you do. Agree."

"Clever girl," Vyacheslav Rudolfovich praises me. He takes the photo from me and puts it back in the folder.

"Sorry," he says, "I can't even leave you her photo, because the whole thing is absolutely secret." The management did not even want to show you this photo, but I insisted. I like things to be human. Is that right, Lukic?

- That's right, - I agree, - so when will I see my bride, Vyacheslav Rudolfovich?

— What you, right! - Comrade Menzhinsky is surprised, - it seemed to me that you understood me. You will never see her, Lukic. Because Comrade Eva, that is the name of your future wife, is performing a government task of particular importance. You even forget that you saw her photo. For the most part, you weren't supposed to see her.

- Your will, - I say, - Vyacheslav Rudolfovich. But I don't understand why this is necessary.

After a pause, Comrade Menzhinsky rubbed his chin with his hand and softly, almost in a whisper, answers:

"You are still young, Lukic. You don't understand many questions. I wouldn't explain it to anyone else, but I'll explain it to you. A comrade performs an important task far from his homeland. But this comrade is a woman, as you could see. She has complexes, like any woman who is not married. Because he does not want to walk in whores. And the leadership decided to satisfy her desire, since in her position any uncontrolled complexes are deadly both for herself and for our common cause.

We chose you, Lukich, as the most trusted and trusted worker among bachelors, and sent her your photo. Comrade Eva liked you, and she agreed to marry you. Now you have agreed, and the problem can be considered solved. Understood?

"Understood," I answer, "only how can we get married under such conditions?"

"We have already taken care of that," Comrade Menzhinsky smiles, opens the safe, takes out this very marriage certificate and gives it to me.

Then he shakes my hand and says: - I congratulate you, Vasily Lukich, on your legal marriage. My mother and father were Catholics and assured that marriages were made in heaven. And my office now is such heaven that you can't imagine higher. So, Vasily Lukich, as they used to say in the old days - "love and advice."

"Thank you, Vyacheslav Rudolfovich," I answer and give him the marriage certificate back.

"What is it, Vassily Lukich?" the Chairman asks me and looks at the paper.

"I already looked," I answer, "everything is in order.

"No," says Comrade Menzhinsky, "you can keep the evidence for yourself. Keep on memory.

- Allow the question, - I say, - Vyacheslav Rudolfovich.

— Ask, — the Chairman smiles.

- Isn't it a secret? If anyone sees

- Secret? asks Comrade Menzhinsky. No, it's not secret. Of course, don't brag about them too much and don't hang them on the wall. So, keep it to yourself. You never know what questions will arise with living space or something else. And in general, according to the law, the marriage certificate must be kept in the family. Why are you and I going to break the law?

A week later, I can say that I almost forgot about this case. Life goes on, but I am a living person. I looked after the girl, let's breed all sorts of shura-muras with her. She moved in with me. Love is such that only doves coo.

Then they call me to the political department. "What are you," they say, "dear comrade, do you allow yourself? What are you doing immoral here? With a living wife, did they settle a cohabitant in the house? Who allowed you to violate the Chekist Code, compiled by Felix Edmundovich himself? You can even say - openly mock him?

"Of course," I think, "It was easy for Felix Edmundovich, who had become impotent while still in tsarist hard labor, to compose all sorts of moral codes there. And if you are a healthy man, then where to go?

That's what I think, but out loud I don't seem to have anything to say.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I'll fix it."

- That's it, - they answer, - for the first time we forgive. But so that her spirit is not in your living space!

What should I do? Give, I think, I will try to marry. Comrade Menzhinsky has long since passed away. And who else can prove whether I'm married or not?

True, the political department knew about this, since I myself foolishly wrote in the registration card that I was married. It will not reach, I think, to the political department!

But no! As soon as we submitted an application to the registry office, the boss calls me and yells in horror: "Are you crazy, Vasily? What are you doing this? Do you want to get a sentence for bigamy? If you really feel like it, I'll send you as a commandant to the women's zone. Have fun there as much as you want, if the lesbians don't stab you!"

It was then that I realized that I had nowhere to go. Everything is captured!

I resigned myself to my sad fate. Random women, of course, were, but to be with someone all the time - God forbid. From the informers from the Political Department it was completely hidden impossible.

And then the war began.

During the war, I was in one such tricky place, which can be called the German rear, or you can call it ours. In other words, I was in the deep rear of both warring sides. And, of course, in such an illegal position that Stirlitz was not dreamed.

"Where was this place," I interrupt Lukich, "that could be considered the deep rear of both ours and the Germans?"

"It was like that," the veteran laughs, "I'll tell you about it sometime later. Now we are not talking about this.

The war is already over. Suddenly they call me to Moscow. From there, I'll tell you, to get to Moscow, as from the South Pole. I ask: "What kind of urgency is this? Put all tasks in jeopardy. And you light me up!"

"Stop talking. Moscow orders - do it!

Do it, do it. I arrived in Moscow on an American flying boat Catalina. We sat down on a pond in Khimki, a car was waiting for me on the shore, and they took me to my native office on Lubyanka Square.

I'm going straight to Comrade Kabulov's waiting room. There are twenty generals sitting in the waiting room, waiting. But the adjutant, as he saw me, jumped up and shouted: "Well, finally! Come in, Vassily Lukich. Comrades, I'm sorry. The most important matter controlled by the Headquarters of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief.

And in such a tone he said this, that everyone in the waiting room stood up, and I broke into a sweat:

"What kind of business is this," I think, "what does the Supreme Headquarters have to do with it?"

At that time, we didn't close at all with the Headquarters, but with the department of special zones of the Gulag, which, to the Headquarters had nothing to do with it.

I enter Comrade Kabulov's office. He comes out from behind the table and drags me into a side room, where, according to their Caucasian customs, a table with wine and fruit is served. I wasn't much of a fan of their persimmon cracker, but I appreciated the honor given to me. Especially from Comrade Kabulov. He is an oriental man, cunning.

He pours me wine into a glass and says:

"I am very glad to see you, Vasily Lukich, alive and well. Many of your envious people said that in your new career you would certainly break your neck. But you, as always, remained on top. And I'm glad to tell you that the leadership presented you for a government award. I just don't remember which one. But the award weighs no less than nine grams. That's for sure.

And laughed. A cheerful man was Comrade Kabulov, God rest his soul! It was said that when they led him to be shot, he also laughed.

All our work seemed to him some kind of big joke. Something like a joke. When they brought him to the basement, he only asked: "Are you serious? Yes?".

Well, we laughed together at my government award, which weighed at least nine grams, then we drank another glass of wine, ate grapes, and Comrade Kabulov said to me:

"Sorry, Lukich, that we pulled you away from business so unceremoniously. But you yourself understand that without a good reason, we would not allow ourselves this. Are you surprised?"

I show with all my appearance that I am immensely surprised.

"That's what we're talking about," continues Comrade Kabulov, "you're a married man, Lukich, aren't you?" Or not?

- Yes, he is married. Fifteen years already, I answer.

"It's good that you don't deny it," says Comrade Kabulov, "I thought you would deny it, refuse, as enemies of the people always do. But you're good, you confessed. I respect and want to drink to your health again.

We drank.

Comrade Kabulov sighed, half closed his eyes. His face became sad, and he says:

"I don't even know how to tell you all this, Vasily Lukich..."

"So what's the matter?" I ask.

"The thing is," Comrade Kabulov replies, "that your wife, Lukich, is asking you for a divorce.

- So, how is it? I wonder.

- Yes, like this, - comrade Kabulov rages, - he asks for a divorce and that's it. I met a man, fell in love and wants to get married. And you, Lukic, don't suit her in some way. Stopped arranging. Maybe you pay little attention to her, I don't understand? It's a common thing. Read "Evening Moscow". There are two hundred announcements of divorce printed daily. I myself, if you want to know, have been married for the fifth time. And nothing. Live for now.

"For fifteen years I have arranged for her," I ask, "and now I've become bad?" Nothing will come of it. I won't give you a divorce.

Comrade Kabulov leaned back in his chair, looked at me strangely, smacked his lips and said:

"So you won't get a divorce?"

"I won't," I answer.

"What do you mean "I won't give you," Comrade Kabulov suddenly yelled, "if I order ?!"

— Comrade General. - I say, getting up, - if you personally want to marry her, then out of respect for you ...

Kabulov blushed like a tomato, and continued, breaking into a squeal:

"A comrade more important than me wants to get married!" And you are standing on the side. If you don't give a divorce, we'll make her a widow. Now I will order you to issue the first category!

According to the first category, this means to the basement and a filling in the back of the head, followed by registration of death in the line of duty.

Here, of course, I was timid. "Okay, choke!" - Think. And he was about to agree to a divorce, when the phone suddenly rang. Kabulov picked up the phone. It immediately became clear that he was talking to his superiors. It seemed to me that with Lavrenty Pavlovich himself, although



Kabulov called him "comrade seventh." And it was clearly about me.

"Yes, comrade seventh," Kabulov reported, "I have it... No, it doesn't, comrade seventh... What? And it is not necessary. I obey, comrade seventh. Let on object is returned? I obey, comrade seventh!"

Kabulov hung up the phone. I see him moving his lips, thinking about something.

"All right," he says calmly, "come back, Vasily Lukich, back to the facility. You are forcing us to violate social law. I didn't expect you..."

I go back and keep thinking, what kind of importance did this happen to my divorce that such important bosses were involved in it? What is my wife doing there? Either she got married in the thirtieth year, now it's the other way around ...

Vassily Lukich thought, overwhelmed by memories, and it suddenly dawned on me.

- Vasily Lukich! I exclaimed. "Isn't it the same Eva Braun you were married to, who later became Hitler's mistress, and in the end, Hitler's wife?"

- Smart you hurt! Vassily Lukich muttered in displeasure. "Now everyone is smart. And then who knew what. There are as many Browns in Germany, England and America as there are Petrovs in our country."

"So it was her?" - I was out of breath.

"Do you believe it," said Vassily Lukich sincerely, "I don't know myself." Well, I told you that we took Hitler and Eva Braun out of Germany back in 1944 and kept them in a dacha near Moscow. And they got married in a bunker completely different. True, by this time the whole complex of government bunkers had already been captured by us. And the whole wedding ceremony was held in the presence of General Serov and his representatives with simultaneous filming for history.

At this point, I don't know: either some new ones were slipped there, or the old ones were delivered by plane. After the war, no one could sort out such cases.

But I think that the old ones were delivered, because otherwise my little wife would not have ended up in prison for violating the law of the RSFSR "On marriage and family".

Somehow, after the war, it happened - the boss called me and said:

— Lukich, you still have nothing to do in the evenings, You are a single man. Do you want to go to the Bolshoi Theater? The ticket is lost.

"Very interesting," I think. - Then they all told me: "You, Lukich, are a married man, but you behave ...", and as I refused to give permission for a divorce, they all began to sing with one voice: "You, Vasily Lukich, are a bachelor, it's easy for you to live: no worries."

- Why did you decide that I'm a bachelor? - I ask the boss, - I, for your information, have been married for fifteen years.

"You were married," the boss explains to me, "and now you are a bachelor." Because your marriage was declared invalid, There was even a special secret decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council for this. Unfortunately, the decree is secret and I cannot show it to you, although you were obliged to sign it.

"How is it that my marriage turned out to be invalid," I object, "when the comrade himself

Menzhinsky registered it.

"Comrade Menzhinsky had his oddities," the chief answers, "besides, those years can be considered an era of revolutionary expediency. And you and I, Vasily Lukich, live in an era of socialist legality. So, in our Soviet legislation there is no legal basis for concluding marriages in absentia without the presence of two spouses. And, therefore, there is a violation of the law, making your marriage invalid. Therefore, Lukich, take a ticket to the Bolshoi Theater and rest.

"Well, if I'm single," I say, "then give me two tickets." I'll invite a lady.

"I don't have two tickets," the chief shrugged his hands, "only one. So sorry.

I went to the theater in the evening. They gave Wagner's opera Valkyrie, if I'm not mistaken. There was a special government lobby with a separate entrance. From the foyer it was possible to go to the government box, where Stalin himself walked, and to different booths simpler for a small public like me. The lobby is empty. Only the Stalinist bodyguard, Major Rybkin, paces back and forth. He saw me and smiled.

- Great, - says Lukich, - did you feel drawn to the theater from bachelor life?

"Hello, Trofimych," I answer, "what are you doing here?" The owner, perhaps, is sitting in a box?

- No, - he draws, - if the owner was in the box, I would have to shoot you, Lukich, for penetrating into a special zone, into which this dressing room would automatically turn. Yes, they wouldn't let you in. And I'm here because I'm assigned to a comrade that you don't need to know about, Lukich. So go to your seat, Lukich, and watch everything that happens on the stage. For me, for example, this is not at all interesting.

And Rybkin's subordinates are standing at the main box: two ambals and one ambalikh in uniform. This means that in addition to men, there are also women in the box.

As soon as I had time to draw such a thoughtful conclusion, I heard a hysterical female voice behind the doors of the box, squealing something not in our language. And an equally shrill male voice. And not in our language either.

Suddenly the doors of the lodge burst open with a bang. Ambals only managed to shied away.

A painted blonde jumps out, already shouting in Russian: "Bastard! Nothing! Don't you dare touch me!" I saw Rybkin and went to him. "Uncle Lyosha," he shouts, "Trofimych! Help! It's coming up again! Comrade Stalin promised..."

Major Rybkin turned purple: "Quiet, fool! I'll give you now "comrade Stalin promised"!

And then a comrade in a baggy suit and crumpled tie appears from the box.

The skull is shaved bald, as in a strict regime zone, the face is pale, twitching. And he says something in non-Nashen language. And one of the hulks runs up to Rybkin and translates what was said into his ear. Rybkin was even more furious. He pulls out a telephone receiver with a cord from a side pocket, puts the cord into some socket in the wall and yells:

"Well, everything is in place. Now I will report to myself about these outrages!"

This one, with a bald skull, as soon as he saw a telephone receiver, he immediately shied back into the box. Rybkin shakes his finger in front of his kingpins: "Who was told not to leave the box?! Are you on duty here or what? Did you want a third term?!"

And the blonde, smiling, comes up to me and says:

"Comrade, your face seems familiar to me. Where could I see you?

That's where I recognized her.

"Hello," I say, "Eva Frantsevna. Finally got to see you.

But she is not happy at all and answers:

"Well, Vasily Lukich, didn't give me permission to divorce then. I'm in big trouble because of you. Threatening to jail for bigamy. What could I do? He did not want to go to the Union without signing up with me. I was afraid.

I ask like a fool

Who is this "he"?

"What does it matter," she says, "only because of you both, I don't want to go to the zone again. - And crying.

"Don't cry, citizen," I pity her, "and don't worry. Our marriage with you was declared invalid because it was entered into in violation of the Soviet laws on "Marriage and the Family", which do not provide for absentee marriage. So tell the investigator.

"You know, Vasily Lukich," she says, smiling through her tears, "I have never loved anyone in the world like you.

While I was thinking about what to answer to this, Major Rybkin came up to me from the side and said: "Sorry, Lukich. The date is over." And Eva was already taken to the box.

I also decided to go to my place, according to the ticket, but Rybkin blocked my path and points to the exit: "Go home, Lukich. There is nothing more for you, brother, to do here. The opera is in German. There is no one in the auditorium. Only in the box - special public.

I went to the exit and quietly asked Trofimych: "What are they doing? How are "convicts" numbered?"

And he also quietly answers me: "They are not listed in any way. They don't exist at all. Formalities alone exist, but they do not.

Such, brag, things happened with my marriage ...

Vasily Lukich fell silent, and, as always, without understanding even half of the veteran's story, I began to ask idiotic questions:

- Lukich, did she know Russian or something?

- Who is she? Vasily Lukich clarifies.

- Well, this one ... - I say not quite confidently, - how is it? Eva Brown.

"But the jester knows her," Vasily Lukich answers, "he has never been interested. What does it matter?

"And you never met again?" I ask, hoping that this story has some kind of romantic continuation.

- We met, - Vasily Lukich says with a strange smile, - she wanted an apartment with me

sue. Yes, but she didn't get anything.

- Because the marriage was declared invalid? I ask, although I don't understand why I need to know all these legal subtleties.

"No," Lukich answers, "but because I am a war veteran, and she is not. Throughout the war, she was swollen in the rear and has no right to benefits.

"So she didn't "swell up" in our rear, but in German," I wonder.

"What difference does it make," the veteran shrugs, "the rear is the rear, and whose it is, it doesn't matter. By the way, I recently read in some newspaper that a German court declared her marriage to the Fuhrer also invalid. And he did the right thing. Because when the wedding was played in the bunker, they had not been there for a long time.

## CRASHED PLAN

When Vasily Lukich is in a bad mood, it is difficult to talk to him. Sometimes you ask: "Vasily Lukich, you know so much, tell me something interesting." Vasily Lukich grumbles: "You never know what I know. I know a lot. And you are not supposed to know. In the old days, tongues were pulled out for this - and they did it right ... "

Vasily Lukic and I met in the editorial office of Politizdat, where he was looking for a "black man" to record his memoirs. These memoirs, entitled "With a Party in the Heart", were mostly written by 1982, but were never published. Although the memoirs concerned the period of the war, when Vasily Lukich coordinated the actions of three partisan detachments at once in Belarus, censorship ruthlessly gutted them, leaving, in fact, only quotes from the classics of Marxism. Vasily Lukich swore terribly, but he was summoned somewhere, talked, after which he officially announced that he was done with memoirs.

"Let's move on to folklore," I suggested. "You, Vasily Lukich, will, like Homer, sing your Odyssey to the next generation, that is, to me. I will sing to the next one, and in five hundred years, look, we will be published.

"I won't tell you anything for sure," the Chekist veteran was angry, "you are talkative beyond measure. There used to be dozens of these. In my old age, I still do not have enough to look for my own ... adventures. They called me to the regional committee. The brat threatened some kind of penalty there for violating party ethics. No, I won't tell you any more.

But sometimes he says...

Once I came to Vasily Lukich, he was watching some regular series of "Seventeen Moments of Spring" on TV. On the screen, the chief of the Gestapo, Muller, in an excellent performance by the talented actor Armor, unsuccessfully tried to expose the Soviet agent Stirlitz. Vasily Lukich, stirring the cooled tea with a spoon, without taking his eyes off the TV, said thoughtfully:

- Doesn't look like himself at all.

Who doesn't look alike? I didn't understand. — Stirlitz?

- What is Stirlitz, - Vasily Lukich muttered. - Stirlitz is a complete fiction. I'm talking about Muller. Could have chosen a better artist.

- Have you seen his photo? I was surprised. - Everywhere they write that Muller disappeared after the war, and even photographs of him could not be found.

— A photograph! Vassily Lukich chuckled. - Yes, I saw him, like you. He gave lectures on the operational search at our academy at the FPC and also taught a special course on the worldwide Zionist conspiracy. During the war, the Germans collected a lot of materials against the Zionists. Muller and was engaged in the generalization of these materials. We called him Genrikh Ivanovich. Good man, simple. He explains everything clearly, talks to anyone easily. I was a lieutenant colonel then. And he - you know!

- Did he drag an interpreter behind him? I asked incredulously. "You yourself, Vasily Lukich, said yourself that you don't know foreign languages.

- Yes, he was better than you and me in Russian, - Vasily Lukich is surprised at my misunderstanding. - He was a professor at our twenty-seventh department. Department of operational search. There knowledge of languages is obligatory for professors. Otherwise they won't approve. Here is Bormann, who, they say, did not know how to speak Russian at all. But I won't lie. I only saw him briefly at one meeting. He, in general, was not listed in our department, but in the nomenclature of the Central Committee. There are rules.

Was Bormann a member of the Central Committee? I wondered.

- He was in the nomenklatura of the Central Committee, - Lukic confidently explains, - and not a member of the Central Committee. It's not the same thing. But he was not a member of the Central Committee. I wasn't even a candidate. They wanted to recommend him as a candidate, but found out that his membership fees had not been paid for fifteen years, if not more. Well, everyone, of course, understood: the war. Therefore, the penalty was not announced to him, but he was not held as a candidate either. In general, I could worry about it. Moreover, for so many years he received a salary in foreign currency.

Vassily Lukich was silent for a moment, apparently remembering something.

"In general, I didn't really like these from the Central Committee," Vasily Lukich confesses. - Snobby, cunning and greedy. They knew how to spin like eels. You won't grab. So this Borman - he worked as deputy head of the economic department - knocked out a personal pension of union significance. Although he had the right only to the Republican. And he lived for himself - did not grieve. He died in 1967, so they almost shoved him into the Kremlin wall ...

"Well, it's you, Lukich, you're bending," I couldn't resist.

- What about the wall? asks Vasily Lukich. - No, of course, he did not pull on the wall. He was buried at Novodevichy. You can go and see the grave yourself. So it is written: "Franz Berger is a personal pensioner of allied significance." Franz Berger is, like, his real name, although I'm not sure. In those years, there was an indication not to write real names on the monuments. Therefore, our general, who slapped Trotsky ... How is he?

"Markader," I prompt.

— Wow, Markader. So he was buried under the name of Gomez. So they knocked out on the monument. And the star of the hero is nearby.

Was Bormann a hero? I clarify.

"They did," Vasily Lukich sighs, "but they didn't let me. Some kind of story he got out there with state money. Couldn't report. And the amounts, you know what. But got out. And he broke through his pension, and the cottage, and did not sit a day. And Muller was both imprisoned and

gone...

- Have you planted yet? I was surprised.

"It all turned out stupidly," Vasily Lukich sighs again. - As this campaign against cosmopolitanism began, everyone seemed to go crazy. They took him to this campaign. Some commission from the Central Control Commission checked the notes of his lectures, found them cosmopolitan and inconsistent with the Party's policy on the national question. And a man disappeared...

- Slapped? I asked.

- I do not know for sure. Vassily Lukich took a sip of his cold tea and continued. - Don't know. I knew all the guys from the Gulag who were at the special points. Before the war, he himself, read, served for twenty years at these special points. There and not like this Muller, sat. I spoke to them quietly, I really liked him. Of course, I couldn't do a lot, but I helped in small things. Well, let's say that rats are not allowed into the cell or bedbugs are not poured. And if the regime is different - so that they give sour cream, even if it's not supposed to. But the guys all, as one, in denial: they didn't hear, they didn't act like that. If they slapped us right in the basement, I would have found out that same day. But - believe it or not - I still don't know anything, - he lowers his voice. - Parasha was that he was handed over to Israeli intelligence. They really wanted to know what he dug up in his Gestapo about the Zionists. And here is just a fight with

cosmopolitans - they got in.

- Something is unbelievable! I shake my head doubtfully. - So they just took it and handed it over?

"It just doesn't happen," Lukich replies. Not just, but in exchange for something. You give us Muller, and we give you the "Doctors' Case".

"Doctors' Case"?! I scream in horror. - And what about the "case of doctors"?

"Well, if you don't understand such simple things," Lukich laughs, "then I can't explain it to you. Do you know that Stalin personally flew to Tel Aviv twice? Lukic enjoys my confusion, deliberately pauses, looking at me with a smirk, and then explains. "He needed to heal. Our owner was really bad. Few people know about that. In forty-three, after Tehran, they thought that everything was already - they would give up the ends. Thank you, Hitler sent his doctor, a Jew. Morrel is his last name or something like that. I don't remember anymore. So he pulled it out. And after the war, this Morrel went to Israel ...

— Together with Hitler? I ask sarcastically.

- And what about Hitler? Vasily Lukich dismisses. - Hitler lived with us at Kuntsevo-4, God forbid, almost from July forty-four. It's you who believe me. I'm not speaking from words, but I saw everything myself. We kept a special airfield near Smolensk during the war. So the Moscow-Berlin planes flew as scheduled. Who flew, why he flew - is not our business. But to take the plane, refuel and send further - this is exactly what my people were doing. The Germans drove all their three-engine "Henkels", and we drove American "Douglasses". I wasn't particularly curious. You know, the conversation was short then - a filling in the back of the head, they would drag him by the legs into a ditch, and no one would remember. But I saw Molotov a couple of times in these planes ... So what was I talking about? You interrupted my thought. I'm telling you: it was scary to look at Stalin. When he realized that his plan had failed, the devil knows what happened to him. Hair began to fall out, teeth too. Well, a person rots alive - that's all. After all, he didn't go to Potsdam himself, he sent a "doll". It was only in Israel that they put him on his feet. I don't know what price they charged him for it. But a lot, probably, considering what kind of ass we are sitting in today. But they patched him decently. In the fifty-second he was already quite like a cucumber ...



"Wow, like a pickle," I intervene, "if I was bent in fifty-three.

"Anyone would be bent," Lukich chuckles, "if they put the entire clip from the Mauser into him ... Yes, sit down, don't twitch. I'll give you the address. The colonel lives on Taganka, a retiree. He will tell you all the details. He himself held on to this Mauser!

Lukich takes a teapot from the table, pours himself half a glass, adds granulated sugar, stirs it and takes a sip with pleasure.

"But that's a different story," continues Vasily Lukich. - And as for Muller, that's how he disappeared without a trace. And Bormann got out. Party apparatchiks - they can get out wherever they want. That's it...

What happened to Hitler? You said that he was sitting in Kuntsevo-4, - opening my mouth, I waited response.

"Yes, he didn't sit there, but simply lived," Vasily Lukich corrects me. - He had a car, went to Moscow when he wanted. Well, they watched him, of course. So that, say, a rally is not gathered somewhere. Or he didn't start yelling from the mausoleum. But he was quiet. I sat more in the country, painting landscapes. Nature is a luxury there. Moscow suburbs! - Vasily Lukich closes his eyes with pleasure (his dacha is also not far from Kuntsevo). - I drew very well, I can tell you. With my woman - such a blonde, I don't remember her name - they went to theaters. In the Bolshoi most often. I loved opera very much. His entire team was with him: Cap the driver, Gunshe the adjutant, and Monk the bodyguard. Good guys, loyal. They stayed with him until his death. He died in 1956 of a heart attack. How old was he? Years sixty-seven - sixty-eight. But he suffered a lot. When the plan collapsed, Stalin never accepted it after the war. Although there were rumors that in the forty-ninth, on his seventieth birthday, Stalin met with him. And, they say, they talked calmly. Well, it didn't work out - there's nothing you can do about it. Hitler himself was not to blame for anything. He completed his part of the plan. Who would have thought it would turn out like this.

- What was their business? I asked, as usual, no longer able to follow the train of Vasily Lukich's thoughts and not really understanding anything. What plan failed them? What is this plan?

- Oh! - Vasily Lukich even closed his eyes from the flood of memories. The plan was great! In the name of this plan, our entire generation worked and laid down their bones. We have invested a hundred million human lives in this plan. And it would have happened if the Japanese shitheads hadn't spoiled everything for us ...

Vasily Lukich even had jawbones on his cheekbones when he remembered the "Japanese shitheads".

— What do the Japanese have to do with it, Vasily Lukich? I almost yelled, despairing at my own stupidity.

"And besides," Vasily Lukich answered harshly, "they themselves can't really do anything useful, and harming others is always welcome!" Well, who asked them to attack the Americans? Why did they need it? I will die - I will not understand. Or did someone pay? But who then?

I don't know if Vasily Lukich addressed me with questions, but I was silent.

"You see," Vasily Lukich said, becoming more and more inflamed, "the plan was drawn up in rough form at the end of 1939, and finalized in detail at the beginning of 1941. The Japanese, of course, were not initiated into it, but it was believed that they would do their own business in China and India and would not be able to interfere in any way. And they, hello, please, on

The United States has attacked! At first, we also did not understand the full significance of this event, and when it came to it, it was already too late. They had in the forty-first, when the Japanese, or rather they were the Japanese, caught them in Pearl Harbor, and there was no army. So, there is only one laugh - in cowboy hats, with hard drives. What about forty-five? What a miracle! Fifteen million with the best air force and navy in the world, and even with the atomic bomb. They stopped us on the Elbe and did not allow us to carry out all our plans. Stalin had a fit. He even began to suspect Hitler whether he sent his physicists to America on purpose to make a bomb and thwart the Great Plan. Hitler had a whole commission working in Kuntsevo. Experts. Everything was checked, rechecked, but the conclusions were unequivocal: he behaved honestly throughout the war. He kept his generals in check tightly. Guderian stopped in time, set up Paulus at Stalingrad, Manstein near Kharkov, organized the Kursk salient. But he missed America, just like us. And if these idiots had not attacked the Americans then in 1941, everything would have worked out, I assure you. Everything would be like in the song: "And from Japan to England, my Motherland would shine."

And then they would have dealt with America. Stalin, however, did not calm down. When we stole a bomb from them, he began to probe them. He started from Korea, and then he began to cook such things that he had to be shot out of harm's way in 1953. You know, these fanatics of any idea, no matter how beautiful it may be, can never calm down. It was a good plan to say the least. Well, it did not work out - calm down. So no. Oh, it didn't work out, so I'll do it for you? Lenin also promised, remember, "to slam the door when you leave so that the whole world shudders." And Stalin was going to clap so that the world would not flinch, but would simply shatter into pieces. But then we all saw that the man was completely out of his mind, so we had to ... I understand that it was insulting to both him and Hitler. It turned out that they spent so much money, sacrifices and energy, turned their countries and all of Europe into ruins only in order to make America the ruler of the whole world. There is their president in Moscow, as the owner comes to his village, and everyone just bends their backs. And there was no mistake in the plan. Everything was provided. But who would have thought that the Japanese would turn a weak, disunited, torn apart America into a monster that would devour the whole world. That's how it always is. I can never figure everything out. How could it happen that the Japanese, not even having an iron nail in their soul, could attack America? Sometimes I don't sleep at night, I toss and turn and think about it all the time ...

Maybe they had their own plan? I suggested. "You have yours, and they have theirs, based on knowledge of your plan. That's why they are now prospering, and we are sitting in a hole and begging for a penny to feed them.

"Yes," Lukich sighs, "I sometimes think so too. They outwitted us. Look, after all, we have already given away everything that we managed to take away during the war for a sniff of tobacco. They gave it for grub so as not to die of hunger. And what will happen next?

"Cheer up, Lukich," I console her. We'll come up with some new plan. Yes, such that the whole world will tremble again.

"No, that's all," Vassily Lukich waves his hand hopelessly. - There is no one to invent now. And the people are no longer the same. There really was a chance then, but the Japanese shitheads ruined everything ...

I looked at the TV screen. Müller and Stirlitz gesticulated with their hands. One of us turned off the sound on the TV, but did not notice it.

GIFT TO THE PRESIDENT

When communicating with Vasily Lukich, I always experienced some strange feeling, very similar to envy. And it's not just that I would very much like, if I live to be eighty-five years old, to look as youthful and fit as he is, with the same clarity of thought and sense of humor, so uncharacteristic of many other representatives of his heroic profession, who made it to the present day.

The point is precisely in the clarity of mind of Vasily Lukich, who knew and remembered so much from our dark "Byzantine" history that only on his memoirs it was possible to create a parallel Public Library, calling it "Vasily Lukich Public Library".

Vasily Lukich is a walking archive. However, this comparison is not entirely valid. In no archive you will find a hint of the information that the memory of this person keeps. That is why I am dying of envy, looking into the cunningly gray eyes of a Chekist-veteran, and I want to turn into anyone in order to penetrate his brain.

Alas, Vasily Lukich says little. All the methods I use to talk him, as a rule, end in failure, knocking out stereotypical remarks from him: "Why do you need to know all this?", "Who do you work for?", "It's better for you not to know such things, otherwise you will end up in a madhouse" The last remark is from our days. Vasily Lukich used to say: "It's better for you not to know this, otherwise you will quickly play the game."

I hoped that after August 1991 he would talk, and even scribble his memoirs, taking me as a literary editor. Nothing happened.

"Vasily Lukich," I pester him, "write your memoirs. And I will publish. Look, all your veterans have already flooded the book market with their memoirs. And you know so much and keep quiet.

— Veterans! Vasily Lukich laughs. Who do you call veterans? They were turned away from the KGB in 1991, so they imagined themselves to be veterans. Are they veterans? Real veterans, I tell you, now one or two and miscalculated ...

Vasily Lukich has one weakness. He loves the newsreels of those heroic years. And his lips are always folded into some kind of malicious smirk. Sometimes he will briefly comment on what he saw, like: "Yes, this is not a chronicle at all. In a special pavilion, the MGB was filmed under the chronicle, God forbid, in the forty-second year. Or he won't say anything at all, but will just shake his head...

Once on TV they showed some old demonstration of workers on Red Square. Stalin, in the form of a generalissimo, waves his hands from the mausoleum, greeting the enthusiastic people, and smiles with a toothless mouth. Vasily Lukich jumped up in his chair. The eyes became narrow and angry, like those of a panther whose tail someone dared to step on.

"You see," he turned to me, "here he is... toothless..."

- Who? I didn't understand. This is Comrade Stalin.

The chronicle is over. President Yeltsin appeared on the screen with a glass in his hand, proclaiming a toast to the veterans. Vasily Lukich sighed.

- Comrade Stalin, you say? .. It's great that your generation remembered him so well in person. You were raised right...

This is where I got angry.

"All right," I say, "Vasily Lukich, blame everything on our generation. It was you who licked his ass for thirty years, and crawled on his belly.

"For your understanding," Vassily Lukich interrupted me, "I'll tell you a story now. It was in the midst of the Doctors' Plot. We all understood that this business was started so that we, the old cadres of the Chekists, would be cut to pieces. Then I was a little on the sidelines, because I studied in the postgraduate course, I wrote my dissertation ...

- What topic? I meet.

"I don't remember," Vassily Lukich waved him off. - I thought I would sit out all this turmoil in postgraduate studies. An-no. A big boss unexpectedly calls me ...

- Who exactly? I'm trying to clarify.

"His surname will not give you anything," the old Chekist smiles. In truth, he didn't have a last name. If in our department a person was known by his last name, it means that he was sitting for representation, did not decide anything at all and did not really know anything. And those who really ran the affairs, no one knew them not only by their last names, but sometimes even by sight. "Comrade Fifth," say, or "eighty-first." And that's it. He will introduce himself to you as Ivan Ivanovich, or even simply: "Call me Comrade General."

So, the big boss is calling me. We worked together during the war, and, it seems, he liked me. Then he assigned me all sorts of interesting things. It was already breathtaking. Not from the complexity of the cases, but from the thought that after such a case I would probably be slapped myself. But it did. And I was already considered a dinosaur in our system. You're kidding, I started working under Menzhinsky. I survived Yagoda and Yezhov. Ilyich was guarded in the zone. And all that. I myself understood that I had been living for at least ten years. And he was surprised.

- He received me at his villa in the suburbs. He was a big boss, and by age he was seven years younger than me. He went uphill after Yezhov. I can see he's upset about something. He treated me to cognac. Traditionally, they drank "for friendship and secret service." I feel he is suffering, he does not know how to start. Then he sat down closer to me and said:

"I want to entrust one rotten thing to you, Lukich. I'm sorry I interrupted your studies. Yes, I just looked around - except for you, there is no one to unravel such a thing. It's a very delicate matter.

And he fell silent again. Collecting thoughts. I decided to help him.

"State," I say, "the facts, Comrade General of the Army." It is not the first time for us to split various delicate matters.

"I know," he answers, "that you, Lukich, will not let you down. But such a case, brother, you have not yet conducted. It hurts with suffocation. Shame on the party.

He fell silent again, splashed a little more cognac, and, therefore, he was talking.

"Before the Yalta conference, Comrade Stalin decided to give American President Franklin Roosevelt a valuable gift as our valiant ally. Comrades in the Politburo conferred and expressed the opinion that the American president should be presented with a gold watch that once belonged to Tsar Alexander III, the strangler of freedom. These watches were made of gold and platinum, studded with diamonds and rubies, had a fight, the melodies there are different and in general. Some famous French company made them, and they cost two hundred and fifty thousand rubles in gold with the money of that time. Almost like a heavy cruiser. They cannot be counted at all with current money - the state budget is not enough. President Roosevelt was not ashamed to give such a watch, because even with their money they cost ten million dollars at that time. Comrade Stalin had to personally present this watch to the president in Livadia.

The chief fell silent, warmed himself up with cognac and continued.

"Our undercover intelligence, which is now working in the very lair of world imperialism, recently found out that Roosevelt did not receive these watches at the Yalta conference. Then he soon died, and the matter seemed to be forgotten. When the leadership found out about this, such a scandal was thrown that the Spasskaya Tower staggered. Find the clock and that's it! And if you don't find it, it would be better for you not to be born into the world. That's how things are, Lukich. Help me out, brother, otherwise everyone is goofy ...

"Yes," I say, "interesting. Where were these watches kept?

"They were stored," the chief answers, "they were stored, as it should be in the Gokhran. Were issued on receipt to Comrade Poskrebyshv ...

So, maybe he stole? I suggested. - He was a pickpocket in his youth, in Alma-Ata, it seems. Played the old instincts when such an expensive thing fell into the hands.

"No, no," says the boss. - Comrade Stalin, however, when he found out about this, he was terribly angry and ordered Poskrebyshv to be imprisoned. We talked to him in prison and found out that he is not guilty, because he has supporting documents.

The general pulled out a piece of paper from the folder and handed it to me. It was a receipt saying that Comrade Poskrebyshv A.N. handed over the antique clock seized from the Gokhran against receipt to citizen Kuraganyan Rustam Azirovich for delivery in Yalta of the Crimean ASSR to Mr. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who works as President of the United States of America, living in Washington, DC, USA.

This is where my head is all over the place. As they say now, the roof has gone, along with the tiles.

- Who is this Kuraganyan Rustam Azirovich? I ask. - And why is he a "citizen" and not a "comrade"? Why did Poskrebyshv give him the watch? Is he working in the personal apparatus of Comrade Stalin? In the management of "Z"?

"Wait, wait," the general interrupts me. I will try to answer your questions. Just keep in mind that I don't know everything either. Well, firstly, this Kuraganyan is not a "comrade", but a "citizen" because he is a prisoner. At one time he received "ten years without the right to correspond", but the execution was replaced by detention in the zone until further notice.

I swallowed so hard. Even my voice dropped. I ask hoarsely:

- A prisoner? What article?

"Without an article," the general explains. - By decree, by virtue of state necessity.

"And who is he anyway?" - I do not let up. - How could it happen that the watch that Comrade Stalin was supposed to personally give as a gift to President Roosevelt, Poskrebyshv gave to some Kuraganyan? What does all of this mean?

I see that my boss has mortal longing in his eyes. He grabbed the "Kazbechin" from the pack, nervously lit a cigarette, collected his thoughts and said:

"You see, Lukich, you must understand everything not with your head, but with your heart. You are our heart, and if it were not so, then, at least, already twenty years ago you ... Hm, are you smart? So, Comrade Stalin is the great leader and teacher of our people, who has been leading us all from one victory to another for more than thirty years; the father of all peoples, he, as you yourself understand, is Lukich, a personality too precious to expose him to even the slightest risk - to travel to Tehran, to Yalta, to speak to the troops from the mausoleum, and so on. What

can only happen! Are the people responsible for the safety of the leader able to foresee everything? Of course not. And you understand it very well. The bolt, let's say, is rotten somewhere, they didn't notice - that's a disaster for you. The locomotive will fly off the rails, the plane will fall, lightning will strike it in the sky, some psycho at the parade will hide the cartridge in the ass and shoot at the mausoleum, the wheel in the car will burst on the road, say, to Kuntsevo, and the car will crash into a pole, and the engine she will explode ... Therefore, realizing this, we prepared a number of citizens who outwardly resemble Comrade Stalin, who during such events were supposed to replace him, like the stuntmen of a film artist during risky stunts. Well, you yourself understand that such a group must be kept isolated from society so that, God forbid, they don't think much about themselves, on the status of prisoners with a death sentence, the execution of which is postponed for another six months every six months by decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

"Well," I drawled, "it's clear now. So, one of them also went to Yalta. So it is necessary to interrogate him, this ... as him, the prisoner Kuraganyan, and that's it.

"You are clever, Lukich," beamed the chief, "that you understand everything. It's right to be questioned. I know this without you. But who will interrogate? I myself can't. I have to ask the Presidium of the Central Committee for permission for each contact. Your friend was sent, with whom you took out an important person known to you from Berlin in 1944. So he went crazy at the first interrogation. Now he is in the hospital. The doctors say he won't survive.

"Okay," I agreed, "I'll try. Where are they all kept?

"In the zone," the chief replied, blushing. - All in one zone are collected for order.

- So where is it? I asked.

The general was terribly reluctant to answer directly. He began to twist, twirl and mumble something.

"I'll take you there myself, Lukich. Not far from here. We'll get there quickly by car. I will sit for the driver.

- In Kuntsevo, or what? - I guessed, and by the way the boss lowered his eyes and became embarrassed, I realized that he had hit the mark.

Does the security know about this? I asked.

"The outside one, of course, doesn't know anything," the chief sighed. - And the inside - in the know. Not completely, of course, either.

I was then tempted to ask: who is in charge of the inner guard? but it was strictest in us not to ask the authorities questions that were not relevant to the case. In a word, we went the same evening.

We are going to Kuntsevo. For the first time, I must admit, I'm worried. We pass security, barriers, checkpoints, notches.

"So that they don't run away," the chief explains. - They will run away, you will not end up in trouble.

We've arrived. As we entered the territory of the dacha, it became dark before my eyes. Comrade Stalin himself spuds a flower bed.

"Calm down," the chief says, "don't twitch. Get out of the car, go through that door. They will meet you there, and I will wait in the car.



I got out of the car. The dacha itself is a little further away, and here is a two-story stone extension. Apparently, the commandant's office of the internal security. As soon as I entered, my aunt, stout, in a white coat, met me.

"Hello," he says, "comrade colonel (and I was in civilian clothes). Come to my office, make yourself comfortable.

She leads me to an office with a sign "Head of the dispensary", while she herself laughs.

"I assure you, Comrade Colonel, that it wasn't mine that got it wrong. They are responsible people. It's more like the Molotovs did it.

"So there are Molotovs like that," I think to myself, but I keep silent, because I have no idea who this aunt in a white coat is and who she is.

We go to her office. It's clean there, Portrait of Lenin. Stationery table, wardrobe. There is no safe. A schedule hangs on the wall with the inscription: "The order of delivery of the dispensary's special contingent to special facilities." And my aunt, all smiling like that, says to me:

"Sit down at this table, Comrade Colonel. And work. Will you send Rustam first?

"Kuraganyan," I nod my head. Bring or send. I don't know your rules.

After about a dozen minutes, this same Kuraganyan enters. In the tunic of the Generalissimo and cap. My heart almost jumped out of my left ear. I wanted to jump up and stretch out at attention. With great difficulty I overcame myself, it was dark in my eyes, and in order to calm down a little, I handed him a pack of "Kazbek".

"Sit down," I say, "Citizen Kuraganyan. Smoke if you like.

"Thank you, Citizen Chief," he replies. - I prefer the pipe.

He takes out a pipe from the pocket of his tunic, and from the other a pack of Herzegovina Flor. He broke two cigarettes, filled his pipe with tobacco, and lit it.

"Do you buy these same cigarettes," I ask, "or are they given out?"

- Everything is given out, citizen chief. We are not offended," he says, releasing smoke rings. - Everything is state-owned. We don't get a single penny.

- How long have you been sitting? I ask, feeling that my heart is calming down a little.

- I received my first term back in 1934. At the Kazan station they took it, consider it for nothing. And then they added two more terms," the "generalissimo" smiled sadly.

- Why did you add it? - I also lit a cigarette and calm the trembling in my hands.

"First," he answers, "for the 18th Congress, although I didn't speak at it at all; and the second for June 22, 1941. Zhukov got away, and they hit me to the fullest with a quarter.

"So," I say, "I want to honestly warn you, citizen Kuraganyan, that a third term is hanging over you if you don't return the watch that Comrade Poskrebyshhev handed you against receipt before leaving for Yalta for the conference.

"I have nothing to give, chief," he shrugs. - I did not go to Yalta.

- Not you? I wonder. - Then who?

"Abashidze," he replies. "I was actually appointed. I will not lie. And Alexander Nikolayevich handed over those watches to me against receipt. And then he says, they say, you will not go. They decided to send Abashidze. And he took away those red watches. You can check with him.

Did he return the receipt to you?

Are you laughing, boss? Kuraganyan smiles. - Who in the zone will allow such a note to be kept? She stayed with Poskrebyshev.

"All right," I say, "for now, go ahead. If you need me, I'll call you again. In the meantime, send me this Abashidze.

"We are not allowed to move around the zone on our own," Kuraganyan replies with fear in his eyes. Call Matryona Ivanovna.

I realized that Matryona Ivanovna is that aunt in a white coat. The door of the office was opened ajar, and she was sitting on a chair in the corridor.

- Matryona Ivanovna, - I say, - take the prisoner to his place, and bring Abashidze to me.

Abashidze was wearing a simple pre-war tunic with a turn-down collar. He entered, stepping softly in Caucasian boots, holding an extinguished pipe in his mouth.

"Give me your first name, patronymic and last name, as well as the term, the beginning and the end of the term," I began the interrogation.

- Abashidze Avtandil Eduardovich, - he answers, - born in 1879, Georgian, non-partisan. Convicted in 1935 for a terrorist attack.

I was about to write all this down in a protocol, and then I think: how could they not turn my head off for such a protocol. I told him the essence of the matter.

"That's right, boss," he says. - Poskrebyshev gave me this watch and said that I would go to Yalta. They took me from the zone to the station, but they returned me halfway. And Yampolsky Iosif Naumovich went instead of me. I handed over those watches to him in the presence of Matryona Ivanovna.

— Is Matryona Ivanovna your commandant? I ask, although I know perfectly well that I have no right to ask such questions.

"She is everything to us," Abashidze sighs, "God bless her." We are all old people. She will feed us and give us an injection when necessary. In recent years, permission has been obtained for us to walk around the garden, plant flowers and all that. Previously, everyone sat in separate rooms and even fed through a muzzle. And there was a lot of work to be done. To teach speeches, to write all sorts of books, to speak.

- And who wrote all these books and speeches for you to teach? - I was carried away, but Abashidze himself, well done, put me in my place.

- It is impossible, citizen chief, we should discuss these issues. For this "tower" jump out  
Maybe.

"And not only to him, but to me too."

- All right, - I say, - go and have a rest, citizen Abashidze.

And I order Matryona Ivanovna to bring Yampolsky.

"Not there," she smiles.

- How is it, there is no place? I jump. "Where is he?"

"In the Kremlin," he answers, "he speaks at the Plenum.

And he shows me today's Pravda. And there in black and white: "Today an extraordinary Plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks is taking place in Moscow ... The main issue of the Plenum is "Further measures for the merciless struggle of our party against rootless cosmopolitanism." The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Generalissimo of the Soviet Union Comrade Stalin will make a report at the Plenum..."

"When will it be delivered?" I ask.

- The convoy is ordered for one in the morning, - Matryona Ivanovna smiles. "They'll bring it somewhere at two o'clock in the morning." You can rest for now, Comrade Colonel. I'll feed you dinner.

I waited. They brought Yampolsky. In the uniform of a generalissimo, but without a mustache.

"I use invoices," he admitted, "I can't stand real ones. And I don't smoke. I just suck on the phone. Allowed for health reasons.

And smiles. I see he has no front teeth. Only two yellow fangs. And the rest had front teeth. Maybe removable though. And I somehow noticed that once Stalin stood toothless on the mausoleum, and another time - with teeth. Okay, I think I will not go into all these details. I'm talking about watches.

"Exactly," agrees Yampolsky, "they handed me this watch and took me to Yalta. The convoy was huge - a hundred people. Everyone was afraid that I would run away at the stage.

"Yes," I thought, "but what, in essence, is the difference between personal protection and an escort? If you think about it, no. Those behind the fence walk proudly that they are entrusted with the dacha of Comrade Stalin himself to guard, not suspecting that they are simply guarding a special zone.

"They brought me to Yalta," continues Yampolsky. - Suddenly Schuber rose. They ordered me to take off my mustache, hand over my watch, pushed me into the plane and back to the zone. Parasha was that the real one had arrived in Yalta.

I reported to the chief on the way to Moscow that I managed to find out.

"Go and figure it out now," the general said gloomily, "who they brought to Yalta at the last moment."

- Isn't it documented anywhere? I ask.

"It may have been fixed," the general shrugs, "only since then three people have been shot in this zone.

"Maybe it's true," I ventured to suggest, "that Comrade Stalin himself arrived in Yalta just as soon as he arrived?"

"Maybe it's true," the general said nervously. - What will it give us? We are ordered to find the watch.

"So we should report to Comrade Stalin what we managed to find out," I suggested. "I can submit a report to you by six in the morning.

— What are you, a fool? the general yelled suddenly. - How will I report to Comrade Stalin? How can I get through to him? Are you sane, Lukich? Do you think that Comrade Stalin himself cleaned up these watches?

I am silent, of course. I broke a sweat. I look at the road. I drove the car back.

"Okay," the general relented, "we'll figure it out. Thank you, Lukich, for your assistance. Keep writing your dissertation. Don't think about anything.

And soon we learned that Comrade Stalin "died unexpectedly."

Vassily Lukich fell silent, poured himself tea leaves from the teapot and drank with pleasure.

"Something I don't understand," I asked dumbfounded. - It turns out that the real Stalin is this watch ... that one?

"Do you think," Vasily Lukich laughed, "that a real Comrade Stalin existed?" That general - he now lives in Israel - recently came to Russia to visit relatives. We met. He told me while drunk that the real one was killed in 1934 along with Kirov. There was no real one, and no one needed it. I understand it well now.

- And what happened to those in the zone? I ask with bated breath.

- Matryona Ivanovna put them all to sleep in one night. The one in the Hall of Columns was Yampolsky. And in the mausoleum - Abashidze. And Kuraganyan, they say, was sent to Gori on the sly.

- And what happened to Matryona Ivanovna herself?

"You are not supposed to know that yet," Vasily Lukich smirks. — Curious you hurt!

## NAMED BROWNING

1

In his old age, Vasily Lukich became addicted to television. The series are different there, he, of course, does not watch overseas and even spits. But all the research of numerous post-perestroika historians and films from the series "Our New Cinema" and "Cinema is not for everyone" is watched with great pleasure and chuckles.

— What are you laughing at, Lukich? I ask him every time I find myself doing this.

- Yes, it was not like that, - the old Chekist grumbles, - they only fool people!

- How was it really? - I start to pry, but I do not always achieve success.

But still, sometimes I get lucky.

Once, together with Vasily Lukich, we watched the film "My friend General Vasily Stalin" on TV. The film is a feature film, where, in essence, a very tragic story of Stalin's son is presented on behalf of the outstanding athlete of that time, Vsevolod Bobrov.

I personally liked the movie. It was very well shown how the son of the dictator patronized Soviet sports and even had clashes with Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria himself, trying to protect his beloved departmental club Dynamo from the claims of Vasily Iosifovich.

I repeat, I liked the film. But Vasily Lukich is not.

- What's wrong again? I ask.

- Yes, everything is so, - Vasily Lukich sighs, - with us, as usual, everything seems to be so, but not so.

So what don't you like here? I keep insisting, feeling from experience that I am on the verge of another incredible story.

"Yes, I like everything," Vasily Lukich answers, "and Bobrov looks like himself, and Stalin's son, if not in appearance, then in behavior, is a spitting image.

— Did you have to see him? - I carefully direct Lukich to the never-overgrown path of oral folk art, called folklore.

"I had to," Lukich nods his head, "during the life of Stalin and after. After, however, only once. I already told you that when Nikita Sergeevich was hacking our system with an ax, I was studying at the academy, in postgraduate studies. In parallel, lectures in the junior year read about socialist legality. The chief was removed and sent as rector to some provincial university. In Omsk, it seems. But he did not reach the place, he died of a heart attack. I could not come to terms with the dismissal from the authorities. But his deputy for science - he was put on the full ten. In his youth, he courted some marshal with boots during interrogation.

I thought everything was forgotten. An no. Our people are vindictive. I am also sitting, waiting for my turn. I did not kill or beat anyone for my service. I had my own methodology - they themselves split and what I needed to sign. Without screams and scuffle, without noise and dust. But they still kicked me out of the organs - as a lecturer in the Knowledge Society. Okay, I think I got off pretty well. Went to get my ID and everything. In the frames they tell me:

- Leave the certificate with you, since you are not dismissed from the bodies, but transferred to the active reserve.

- How is that? I ask.

- And so, they answer that you will receive a paycheck in two places at once three times a month. Two in the "Knowledge" society and once with us. In the waiting room on the Kuznechny Bridge, in the window "7", along with the informers.

"Survived," I say.

"Nothing," they consoled, "you'll endure it, you, Vasily Lukich, dear, are supposed to have a "tower" in modern times. Say thank you for being an adjunct. As for the adjuncts, there was a special instruction: to save everyone for the future struggle for the happiness of the people. And your whole old department has already, read it, flown through the chimney of the crematorium. Usyok?

"Okay," I think, "let's get along somehow." I wanted to mention the pension, I already had thirty-five years of service by that time. But life, as they say, is more precious.

And I went to the "Knowledge" society to give lectures. Mainly, on house managements I read for pensioners. There is only one topic - "The Great October Revolution and its World-Historical Significance". You'll drum out two or three lectures a week and be free -

Do whatever you want. From two paychecks, you know, he got fat, got fat and almost began to collect stamps.

It means that some time passes. My new superiors call me: "How do you like it, Vasily Lukich, with us? Are there any complaints or wishes?"

- Everything is fine, - I say, - but is it possible to change the contingent, that is, the audience? And then some pensioners, and even those mostly old women. I want something bigger.

"That's why we invited you," the chief answers, "since our society is all-Union, would you like, Vasily Lukich, to apply your broad knowledge, as they say, far from Moscow?"

— In Magadan? I ask.

"What a joker you are," the chief laughs, "no, not in Magadan. And, say, in Kazan. They have a bad situation with cadres in the line of our all-Union society. Business trips, again, apartment. Well, how?"

"Okay," I thought, "why not go. As I undertook with this postgraduate course, I never left Moscow anywhere. So, it's even good to ventilate a little.

I come home and start packing. A towel is there, a brush, a soap dish, as the song says.

At the information desk I find out when the train to Kazan is, and I get ready to go to bed. Suddenly telephone call.

I hear: "Vasily Lukich!" Hello dear! How is your health?

I recognize: the asshole is one, he worked in my team. Out of nowhere, he was transferred to us as a junior lieutenant. All the cases that could then be entrusted to him were to give me an overcoat and answer by phone: "Comrade colonel at a meeting."

When I left for the academy, I heard that he went uphill under Ryumin and personally participated in the arrest of Abakumov. So I decided that he was definitely covered. It turned out he was wrong. Quite the contrary. He put all the bosses - direct and immediate - against the wall, and he himself emerged into the world with double-lumen shoulder straps.

"I found out," I mutter, "what happened?"

"Yes, nothing happened," he answers, "would have come to us tomorrow at about eleven o'clock ... To the seventh entrance. I'll drop the pass. Agreed?"

"Tomorrow I can't," I say, "I'm leaving on a business trip ...

"We know, we know," he laughs, "you will go the day after tomorrow." It's OK.

I come tomorrow, as I was told, to the seventh entrance. Meets me, smiles:

- Long time no see, Vasily Lukich. You filled up something. And so - well done!

Previously, he only dared to call me "Comrade Colonel", but now he's getting familiar!

"It's okay to start with compliments," I said irritably, "why did you call?"

"God forbid," he says, "that I should dare to disturb such a person as you.



I'm still a small person. And Ivan Alexandrovich calls you personally, for whom I am now a guarantor.

Ivan Aleksandrovich is Army General Serov, who in those years was in charge of our "office". I remember him from before the war. He was transferred to bodies from artillery, because there were not enough firing squads in the thirty-seventh year. He commanded one such team as a lieutenant for three years and liked the authorities. Marshal Zhukov doted on him and made him a representative of the authorities, first at his headquarters, and then half of Germany. Together they took half of Germany to their summer cottages. Abakumov wanted to expose them then, but did not have time. And when the owner was gone, Zhukov took over the Ministry of Defense, and Serov - our office, and along with the GRU.

You understand when such a person causes, always chills on the skin. The power they have is so incredible that they can spank right in their office - and nothing. They will be dragged by the legs to the basement and cremated. And it is necessary - and they will put it alive in the stove, so that they can realize their guilt.

However, I was consoled by the fact that for such a procedure it was not at all necessary to call me to the very top. The same "six" that called me on the phone could credit me right at home. Especially since I live alone.

OK. He takes me to the waiting room: "Wait here!"

Himself - walk out the door. After a minute, approximately, he sticks his head out and shows with a nod - come in, they say.

I enter.

General Serov was sitting in the old Abakumov office. Only Viktor Semyonovich had a full-length portrait of Stalin, while the new one had a portrait and a bust of Nikita Sergeevich.

Of course, I report in all form:

"Comrade General of the Army, I have arrived on your orders!"

And he comes out from behind the table and meets me with outstretched hand.

"Very glad to see you, Colonel!" - He says, - Heard a lot about your affairs. If it were my will, I would never let you go to the reserve ...

"And I would have ordered a slap," I think.

"Sit down, sit down, colonel," the general continues, "smoke if you like." Tell me about your life. Are you bored? Be patient a little. We'll get you back on track soon. We should not throw away golden shots. How do you think?

Of course, I keep my mouth shut. If I am a "golden frame", then I have nothing to say. No need. Gold is always gold.

Serov seated me at a table, and he sits down opposite. I sighed, remembering how, at the same table, Abakumov, the deceased, spoke to me for the last time before his arrest.

The general understood my mood and said:

"I know that you have been in this office more than once, Vassily Lukich. I don't change anything here on purpose, although Viktor Sergeevich and I weren't friends, God rest his soul, but he was a man. He knew the matter. Let's remember him, Vasily Lukich!"

And pours two glasses of some green liquor.

If not for this toast, I would never drink. Would refuse. But he decided to honor the memory of Viktor Semyonovich. In the old days, he would have been glorified as a martyr, or maybe canonized as a saint. Under Stalin, after all, he was arrested, and under Khrushchev, he was slapped.

- Did not know? Lukich turned to me, interrupting the story, "you don't know much yet..."

Vasily Lukich was silent for a while. I poured him his favorite cold tea, stirred the sugar with a spoon so that he would not be distracted, and I wait, I do not breathe.

"So, we mentioned Abakumov," continued Vasily Lukich, "General Serov put away the bottle, again sits down next to me and says:

- Heard you, Vasily Lukich, are going to Kazan?

"Yes," I nodded, "they send me there on a business trip from the Knowledge Society. Lectures read.

"It's a good thing," the general agrees, "I would also be happy to give lectures to the people, if there was time. But there is no time, Lukich. This office is where I work and live. I sleep on the old sofa that Ignatiev left. Understand?

How can you not understand. It is clear that there is no time.

- And therefore, - the general continues, - since you are going to Kazan, could you at the same time fulfill our small request? The matter is quite trifling, but you yourself will understand that there is no one to entrust it to you at the present time. Because of the delicacy of the case itself. You, Vasily Lukich, already know so much that if you learn a little more, it's not scary. And to open new permits - you know what a hassle! And where do you get the right people? You, Vasily Lukich, did not prepare your shift, and if you managed to teach anyone anything, then these comrades had to, unfortunately ... You understand.

"Yes, perhaps you are right, comrade general," I say, having completely got used to it, "you can't find anyone else on delicate matters. All my service I was only engaged in delicate matters: either I guarded Lenin in the zone, then I took Hitler to Moscow, then I interrogated three Stalins at once on gold watches ...

"Quiet, quiet," Serov jumped up and pointed at the walls with his hand, "what's the matter with you, Lukich?" No one has the right to know about your affairs. Even I do not have such permission, and if I do, it is only by position.

So: the current work, of course, is not as large-scale as your previous work, because everything is smaller and degrading in this world. And not really, I'll tell you honestly, interesting. The matter is as follows. Stalin's son Vasily now lives in Kazan after serving his term and rehabilitation. After the events of 1953 known to you, Lukich, Vassily Iosifovich had to be imprisoned for very strange behaviour. This is not about the fact that he was yelling everywhere about the murder of his father, but that for some unknown reason, for some reason, he considered himself the heir to almost the throne, claiming to be the leader of the Soviet people, as well as the party and government. If Comrade Stalin had decided to make his power hereditary, he would have left the necessary documents, passing them either through a congress, or through a party conference, or at least through the Presidium of the Central Committee. But, since Comrade Stalin did not leave any such documents and did not even raise this issue, all the claims of Vasily Iosifovich were found unfounded and provocative. Therefore, it was decided to isolate him from society under the pretext of a false denunciation of Air Marshal Novikov. When did Vasily

Iosifovich calmed down a little ("and completely drank himself," I added to myself), an opinion was expressed about the possibility of his release and even the return of his military rank in order to pay an appropriate pension. And so they did, choosing the city of Kazan for him to live.

So far the general hasn't told me anything new. I knew all this without him, and even more.

Meanwhile, General Serov moved closer to me and, lowering his voice, continued:

- We managed to find out that after Vasily graduated from the flight school, Comrade Stalin gave him a personalized Browning pistol number two. There is a version that on a small silver plate embedded in the pistol grip, it says that the gift is in honor of graduating from college.

The general went into a whisper:

- But there is a version that it was from this pistol that Comrade Stalin ... this ... that ... his wife Nadezhda Alliluyeva. Understand? And he gave this gun to his son not at all in honor of graduating from college, but as a warning after some other drunken disgrace. Like, as I did with your mother, I will do the same with you if you don't come to your senses. And even on the name plate it is allegedly written: "Remember about mom!" So, Lukich, this gun must be taken away from him.

"Why wasn't that Browning taken away from him when he got his term?" I ask, surprised.

- They clapped, comrades, - the general only spread his hands, - that's all I can say. Criminal negligence - there are no other words. They have already received their well-deserved punishment.

The general ran his hand over his throat.

"Until recently, we didn't know anything at all about this pistol," he admitted, "and probably wouldn't have known if Vasily Iosifovich hadn't started waving this Browning in Kazan taverns in drunken disgrace, uttering threats to the leaders of the party and government.

— Really? I wondered.

"Imagine," General Serov mournfully confirmed his words, "you, as a trusted comrade, have the right to know that citizen Dzhugashvili did not hesitate to say that with this very hand, from this very pistol, he would personally shoot our dear Nikita Sergeevich!" Agree, Lukic, that we cannot turn a blind eye to such statements.

- And why can't the seizure of the pistol be entrusted to local comrades? I asked.

"Well, Lukich," drawled the general, "you surprise me. This is the son of Stalin after all. No one has the right to talk to him about such topics. This is what happens if any policeman can take away anything from our children - only specially selected people, and then in exceptional cases. So, when you carry out the seizure, everything must be within the framework of social law ...

- With witnesses? I ask.

"Everyone who worked with you," the general laughed, "always noted in you a healthy sense of humor. Without humor in our work is impossible. But do it politely, in a good way. Understand?

"And if it doesn't work out in a good way," I ask, "then how do you order to act?"

Serov smiled broadly: "Well, what should I teach you, Vasily Lukich? Act according to the situation, but do not return without a pistol. 2

In general, I came to Kazan. I go to the Knowledge Society to celebrate a business trip. They are surprised: "We didn't call you," they say, "We don't have enough for our planned workload."

"Well, they didn't call, so they didn't call, I answer, mark the business trip tomorrow. I want to walk around the city. Never been before."

And I go to the specified address.

Even from a distance I noticed a policeman in the front door and realized that I was going the right way. I don't know what happened to my face during the years of service, but although I was, of course, in civilian clothes, the policeman, as he saw me, stretched out, his hand under his visor, introduced himself and asked: "What are the orders?"

- At ease! I say. - At home?

"That's right," the guard answers, "they are resting."

Later, seven years later, I accidentally met this guard in one of our offices in colonel's epaulettes. So, then he was no lower than a major. This is so, by the way.

I call the apartment. Vasily Iosifovich himself opens. In an army jacket without shoulder straps, in breeches and slippers.

- What do you want? - speaks. - Who allowed it?

"We need to talk," I answer, "the guard downstairs allowed me."

He looked at me so attentively and smiled.

— Ah, namesake! - his memory for faces was amazing, - do you all play for Dynamo? In what rank?

"Colonel," I answer, "it's been fifteen years since I've been a colonel."

"Because he's a fool himself," Vasily Iosifovich mutters and leads me into the room, "then he would have listened to me, he would have transferred to the Air Force, he would already be a general, like me ...

Once again Vassily Lukich leads me into the strongest amazement, and I interrupt him with a question:

- Which Dynamo, Vasily Lukich? What, did you play sports?

"I played chess for the championship of Moscow," Lukich smiles, "under a pseudonym. True, everyone knew who I was, and they did not dare to win against me. Especially the Jews, who were ninety-five percent. But to be honest, I pulled with the strength of the master."

"So where did you learn to play chess like that in your profession, Vassily Lukich?" I ask.

- What surprises you? he laughs, "do I not look like a master of sports in chess?"

I get embarrassed and mumble something unintelligible, which, they say, I always imagined

chess masters in a slightly different way. And in general, according to my calculations, Vasily Lukich simply had no time to learn how to play chess. After all, his biography is such... An illiterate peasant by birth, from the age of sixteen in the GPU, before the war he worked in the Gulag as a commandant, and there the war, the academy, postgraduate studies and all the accompanying events did not at all stimulate the study of chess textbooks.

"You fool," Vassily Lukich says in a slightly offended tone, "do you know who I learned chess from? At Ilyich himself, when he was sitting in my zone. We used to sit at the blackboard all evenings. This, I'll tell you, was a player. If politics hadn't ruined him, he would definitely have become a world champion. He developed the tactics of the so-called "proletarian defense" and taught me. As I see it now: he sticks his fingers into his vest, walks around the cell, points at the chessboard with his hand and says: "Pawns, my friend, are the advanced vanguard of the world proletariat, and therefore are subject to total extermination. The current rules of the game are very imperfect, since each player must be given the right to destroy not only the opponent's pieces, but also his own. That's when the world revolution will come!..." He was a man of genius!

My head is spinning, I stop thinking about anything and ask Lukich not to tell me more about the theory of chess, but to continue about his visit to Stalin's son in Kazan. 3

Vassily Lukich fell silent, closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair, immersed in memories.

"Lukich," I asked, stuttering with excitement, "tell me honestly: did you kill Vasily Stalin?"

The eyes of the old Chekist opened wide.

"You are completely stunned," he replied indignantly, "with what joy I had to kill him. He gave me the gun. Yes, and I did not have such powers ...

"But after all, General Serov, sending you to Kazan, said that ..." I try to remind.

"Only a jerk like you, who understands nothing about the structure and methods of our office, can carry such nonsense," Vasily Lukich interrupts me. - If it was necessary to remove it, then a special comrade-liquidator would be sent with me. In those days, on the Lubyanka, a whole department of liquidators was fluff from idleness. They were, I tell you, experts. Like magicians. He runs a finger across your palm and you are already a dead man. And no one would have entrusted me with such a thing. Everyone knew that I knew nothing about such matters. For the entire service, including the war, he did not kill anyone. In his youth, when he was completely stupid, I remember, he asked Menzhinsky himself to join the firing squad, so that with his own hand the enemies of the working people would be put to waste. Yes, thank you, he did not allow. "We are preparing you, Vasya, for another. And if you start killing, you will lose your instinct in an instant!"

- What sense? I ask dumbfounded.

"I don't know," Vassily Lukich mutters, "it was inconvenient to ask then. Class instinct, probably ... But the liquidators, on the other hand, had an easy service. Today he is a sergeant - the commander of the firing squad, and tomorrow, you see, he is already a general, in charge of the whole administration. Take the same Serov. I did not notice at all how he went from the commander of the execution platoon to the generals of the army. It's like a fairytale...

- So why was Stalin's son eliminated after all? I ask. What were they afraid of? He had no right to power. I don't think he was even a party member. Or Joseph Vissarionovich, if you don't remove him in time, wanted to proclaim himself emperor in five years, and declare Vasily crown prince?

"I don't think so," Vasily Lukich shook his head, "why Stalin had to declare himself emperor if he was already a generalissimo." Who is the generalissimo? This is the military dictator of the country. And above the generalissimo is only the Almighty. There is no one else. No, I think Stalin had something else in mind. Yasha told me something after the death of the owner. And yes, I knew something.

What is Yasha? I'm interested.

"Yasha," Lukich asks again, "this is Stalin's cook. The person closest to him. Stalin, even before he awards himself with some kind of order, Yasha first awarded. Yasha had four Orders of Victory. Stalin used to say to Zhukov: "Here you and I have two Orders of Victory, and Yakov has four. Learn!". And Yasha had two boxes of different smaller orders, because, just as Stalin awarded which marshal, Yasha must also have the same order. So that the marshals do not think much of themselves.

— And where is Yasha now? Breathlessly, I ask.

"He's already dead," Vasily Lukich answers, "but he was a big man. Only Matryona Ivanovna, who was engaged in doubles in Kuntsevo, maybe inferior. So, he told me that Stalin had an idea, like Generalissimo Franco. It's a gift that both were generalissimos, they thought the same way. Or maybe someone stole from whom. Don't know. This idea was to correct the country during his lifetime, and after death to restore the legitimate government.

"I don't understand," I swallowed my saliva, hiccupping, "what is legal government? When was it legal in our country?"

"What a fool you are," Vasily Lukich chuckled, "and you still consider yourself a historian!" Look at the example of Franco to make it clearer to you. What happens to others is always clearer to us than what is happening under our own noses. In 1931, as you probably know, the monarchy was overthrown there, revolutionary games were staged, which then, skipping many well-known events, led to the dictatorship and long-term power of Generalissimo Franco. But Franco, who overthrew the communist dictatorship, did not have a very high opinion of his own dictatorship either. I realized that I couldn't live like this. That is, you can, of course, but you won't live long. Some are sitting, some are hanging, the rest are shaking, on such a basis a modern state cannot exist. First, it impoverishes, then it gets into debt, imperceptibly becomes a colony. Therefore, Franco bequeathed to return to where this whole mess began - to a constitutional monarchy. Well, lost in the development of five to ten years. It happens to everyone. But there is no way forward - a dead end. Either lie down and die, or return to the place where you turned onto this dead end path. No choice. Come back and move on, trying to catch up with the rest of the countries that, while you were beating your head against this very dead end, have already gone far ahead. That is why the Generalissimo decided to restore power, which at the very least, but led Spain along the path of world progress without bloody civil wars and arbitrariness of the political police. For this purpose, the late Franco cherished one of the princes of the overthrown royal house, Juan Carlos, near him. At first, all this was done in an atmosphere of absolute secrecy, then several well-thought-out "leaks" were given on this issue to test the reaction within the country and in the world, and then they began to act completely openly. As a result: Franco died, Juan Carlos sits on the throne of Spain, the flowering of democracy, economic progress, national happiness and the adored monarch. Washington is crying with happiness, and even Moscow is establishing diplomatic relations with Spain.

After all, Hitler also thought about this and gave the princes of Hohenzoller gold party badges. But he didn't have time, because he was an indomitable romantic, and like any romantic, he was quickly expelled backstage by harsh practices. Well, sensibly I'm everything to you

explained?

"Maybe it's sensible," I shrugged, "but I still didn't understand anything. I knew about Franko even without you, Vassily Lukich. All the newspapers wrote about it. But what does Stalin and his son have to do with it?"

"And besides," Vasily Lukich explained, "that Comrade Stalin, whoever portrayed him for us, was not a fool either and understood that it was also impossible to live the way he and Lenin came up with for a long time, but there was nowhere to tear his claws. You will have to endure until death. And for later, our great generalissimo thought up the same thing as his Spanish colleague, Franco. That is, to restore the monarchy in the country in the form in which it has existed in our country in recent years: a constitutional monarchy under an autocratic monarch. Here, in Russia, you know yourself, everything is a little bit through the ass.

- Well, you give, Lukich! - involuntarily escapes from me. - What are you - in general ?!

— Don't rumble! - the veteran laughs, - look what is happening in the country now? The past seventy years have never happened. All broken threads: socio-political, economic, military, spiritual, and so on, are trying to connect with what existed before 1917. Because seventy Soviet years gave nothing but mountains of shit and oceans of blood. So, like it or not, but we must return to the place where we turned into a Marxist-Leninist dead end ...

"That's all clear," I agree, "I'm even ready to assume that Comrade Stalin, like his friend Generalissimo Franco, understood all this well, suffering for the fate of his homeland, although this is very doubtful. But in our country the situation was quite different than in Spain. There, King Alphonse XIII, together with the entire august family, fled abroad and lived peacefully. Franco chose a nobler prince, raised him himself in the best traditions of European-American democracy...

"Add to that," continued Vasily Lukich, "that Prince Juan Carlos also graduated from the flight school before..."

— Flight school? I ask stupidly. What about the flight school? I do not understand anything. Franco had someone to patronize to restore the monarchy. The entire royal family lived abroad. And we have? Every schoolchild knows that the last tsar and his entire family were destroyed in the Ipatiev House.

"What every schoolboy knows," Lukich remarked sagely, "always proves to be complete nonsense. No one thought to destroy them. They lived quietly for themselves near Moscow. Under arrest, yes, but not too bad. The queen only lost her mind later, so she was transferred to my zone. With the right of correspondence. I told you about it. And it flies in one ear, flies out the other, and nothing stays in your head.

"Yes, no," I justify myself, "I remember how you told me about this when we were walking around the monastery. I just thought, Vasily Lukich, that you were joking..."

- Good jokes! grumbled the old Chekist, "you don't joke with such things, my brother. I'll tell you more: my zone and the place where the royal family was kept, in fact, also a zone, were structurally considered one unit with a common commander. So I was on the party account there and went there to all party meetings, handed over contributions there, and much more. So I've seen them all, like you now.

I am silent, completely crushed by the information that has fallen on me with blocks of collapsing consciousness.

"Somehow," Vasily Lukich continues, without looking at me, "I arrived there, God forbid, in the year twenty-four, I think. Or later? Exactly, later, because Vladimir Ilyich was already at my place. It was on his business that he came, to petition that he be allowed to have a complete collection of his own works in his cell. We discussed it at our party activists and decided what should be satisfied. And now they had to carry out the decision of the primary party cell through a closed party meeting of the unit.

I arrived, so I see some kid running around the zone. Years five. I ask the local opera officer: "Who else has taken root with you?" The zone was considered top-secret. And the opera officer answers me: "I'll tell you a secret, Lukich. This is the prince's son." My eyes went wide with surprise. So, I'm asking, the prince? He's still a kid himself." and I ask: "So how was the son formed?" Oper sighed and answered: "Don't ask about anything, Vasily. Here such things happened under the old commandant that you would not believe! I don't know how to sort it all out. And you no longer be curious, because I have an order to spray all those who are curious with my own hand!" And slaps himself on the lid of the Mauser.

Okay, I think. "There are enough secrets to get into others. We held a party meeting. They made a decision: to satisfy the prisoner's request. I stayed a little at the headquarters, waiting for the minutes of the meeting to be printed to me in two copies, as it should be. Then I collect my coins and get ready to leave the facility.

The object itself on the island is located in the middle of the lake in some former old-fashioned mansion. On the other side, where the external guard stood and guarded our horses, the boat went, ordinary, rowing. I, therefore, leave the headquarters and go to the shore. Suddenly, this kid runs to meet me. He runs up to me, lifts his head and asks:

- What is your name?

Vasya, I answer.

"My name is Vasya too," he says.

- So, we are namesakes, - I smile, - and whose will you be?

I've always been like this. I know I shouldn't ask, but I ask anyway.

"I," the kid informs importantly, "is the son of Comrade Stalin."

"Wow," I think, "I got stuck. Even now dad will appear, stop later, blink your eyes.

"Well, that's how we met," I say to the child, but I myself want to go around him and disappear.

Suddenly a woman appears, young, about twenty-five years old, no more. It seemed to me a beauty.

"Vasya," he shouts, "where did you run away again. Come here, we'll go home soon."

She saw me, nodded her head affably and said: "Excuse me, please. Always running, distracting people from business. And she takes the baby in her arms. And he murmurs to her: "Mom, mom ..."

That's where I recognized her. Well, of course, this is Stalin's wife - Comrade Nadezhda Alliluyeva! I had heard that Comrade Stalin visited this facility, but I did not know that he also brought family members here.



Okay, I guess it's none of my business? He put his hand to the visor and to the boat. So that it would not occur to her to ask about my last name. And in his own thoughts: "If this is the son of Comrade Stalin, then why did the opera say that this is the son of the prince. What does it mean?"

Maybe ask Lenin in the evening over chess? Moreover, we granted his request - to have his own compositions in the cell.

Then I decided not to do it. Still snitch, then you won't get into trouble. As a result, I spat on this matter. Why do you think I need to figure this out? What I need to know, I will know.

And then so many things came up that I forgot to think about it at all. True, once again at the facility he asked the opera, he could not resist: "Where is this kid, that that time he was running around the zone?" The opera looks at me with his cold eyes, as before enforcing, but smiles: "There was no kid, Lukich. You imagined. Got it?"

"Understood," I answer.

What is incomprehensible here? All clear. "I think Lukich will bring you, your tongue to the highest measure." But it worked out again.

Many years have passed. Somehow, when I was already studying at the academy, and at the same time I was fulfilling various delicate instructions from the command, I had to interrogate Yasha the Stalinist cook. Once, after one dinner, Stalin's stomach seized, and he immediately ordered Yasha to be arrested in order to find out on whose orders he wanted to poison him.

The boss says to me: "They want to formalize him to the highest degree. But you work with him a little, don't bring him to the "tower". Maybe the owner will forget about him. Yasha is a good person." I myself knew that Yasha was not only a good person, but most importantly, our person. Moreover, this is not the first time he has come to us. Under Yasha's position under Stalin, you can imagine how many envious people and enemies he had, who constantly whispered to the leader that Yasha wanted to poison him or lime him with the help of witchcraft.

We were even once ordered to check Yasha to see if he was a sorcerer. There were no methods in this regard, and from old books it was known that otherwise than on a rack with fire, the sorcerer could not be recognized. Of course, there was no electricity in those days. We asked Lavrenty Pavlovich if it was possible to recognize a sorcerer with the help of current, but while the request went through the authorities, Stalin himself called us and asked: "Did you shoot my Yasha there, for an hour?" "No, no," we say, "don't worry, Iosif Vissarionovich. Your Yasha is alive and well ... What do you order?" "To be in the Kremlin tomorrow and take up duties." Apparently, while Yasha was sitting with us, the leader himself was sitting on dry food, since Yasha could not find a replacement. Nobody in the world knew how to make such kharcho, chanakhi or satsivi as our Yasha.

This time they bring Yasha to me. He was so stately, of himself important, in the tunic and shoulder straps of a lieutenant general. Stalin kept promising to make Yasha a colonel-general, but did not have time.

"Well," I say, "Yasha, did you want to poison the leader again?" Confess! Who did you work for?

Usually, after such a question, we laughed together, but Yasha did not laugh here, sighed and said:

"It will be the end of us all soon, Lukich. Iosif Vissarionovich became very bad. The will is written. He put Poskrebyshev in jail, there is no one to dictate, and he himself gets tired of writing for a long time. Called me. He says: "Yakov, write, I will dictate to you." And I write in Russian very badly. And I ask: "Is it possible in Georgian, Iosif Vissarionovich?" "No," he answers, "it's impossible in Georgian. Because I will dictate to you, Yakov, my will." "But what are you," I say, "Joseph

Vissarionovich, are you going to die in any way? Why a will?" "To die is not to die," Joseph Vissarionovich frowned, "but you need to think about the transition of power to a new direction. And it will turn out, as with Ilyich. He disappeared and did not have time to give any instructions. It's good that I got there. What if I didn't exist?" And he dictates to me: "Write: page 4. Did you write? Write further: thus, he is the legitimate heir of the ruling dynasty and my family, and therefore must be crowned, according to tradition and the corresponding decision of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, in the Assumption Cathedral of the Kremlin, becoming at the same time the Emperor of All Russia and the General Secretary of the Party. A new line". I raise my surprised eyes at him, and the devil pulled me to ask: "Who are you, Joseph Vissarionovich, want to appoint as emperor? Is it Kaganovich for an hour? He sucked on an extinct pipe and calmly says: "You are not a Russian, Yasha, a person. And you, the national people, cannot understand us Russians... Get out. I will write myself." And in the middle of the night they came for me and sent me to the Lubyanka. I've been sweating.

"No," I say, "Yakov, I won't record your nonsense ... Otherwise, you won't end up in trouble later." I'll call a car and send you to Lavrenty Pavlovich's dacha. Live there until the owner wants to eat kharko again.

I go to my boss, the one that Yasha called me from the academy to interrogate, and he measures the office from corner to corner with a nervous step.

"Well, what did he tell you?" he asks. Did you talk about the coronation?

I report to him what I learned from Yasha.

"I understand," the chief says gloomily, "that Comrade Stalin wants to become emperor in his old age. That's why he started this campaign against rootless cosmopolitanism. The idea is good: to combine Russian nationalism with the teachings of Marx and Christ. And before that, all members of the Politburo should be shot out of harm's way.

- For what? - I'm surprised, - they won't utter a word. Whatever they say, they will do.

"You're at the academy, Lukich," the chief chuckled, "behind life. So they can utter that all of Moscow will have to be plowed up with tanks. Go, Lukich, write your thesis further. Sidi quiet.

I left and thought: "They will kill the old man, how to give him a drink, and throw the will into the toilet." Then again I remembered the scene that I observed at the special facility in my youth. But the final conclusion could not be made yet. But when I saw the inscription on the handle of that toy Browning, everything immediately became clear to me.

"I don't know what became clear to you," I say, "but from what you told me, Vasily Lukich, I understood absolutely nothing.

"Well, excuse me," Vasily Lukich spread his hands, "if you're so stupid, how can I help you?"

I really was too dumb to perceive the incredible stories of the old Chekist. My head was buzzing, trying to connect those scraps of threads that Lukich pulled out of the tangled tangle of our recent history. The royal family, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, the continuation of the dynasty, the son of comrade Stalin, comrade Stalin himself, rapidly falling into madness in old age, Vasily Lukich and his superiors, a toy Browning with a name plate and a special-purpose dispensary called a crematorium ...

And Vasily Lukich, after a pause, said thoughtfully:

"You can understand Comrade Stalin. He did everything he could. He tried to give Vasily the same upbringing and education that princes in Europe always received: a flight school, a general staff academy, a university. But in all these educational institutions he was only able to be taught to drink vodka and lead a hockey team. Vasily Iosifovich ruined the hockey team, and vodka, in turn, ruined him and the dynasty. So Comrade Stalin sacrificed his wife in vain.

## STALIN'S TESTAMENT

I never learned to understand when Vasily Lukich is telling the truth, when he is not, and when he is simply fooling me, taking advantage of my gullibility and complete lack of information. Often I am annoyed by my helplessness when, with my mouth open in surprise, I listen to stories about events that, by all standards of common sense, should be considered outrageous.

In my gut, I understand that in our ugly and ultra-closed society, anything could happen - even the most incredible. The soldier Chonkin dreamed that Stalin was a woman.

— No, — Lukich laughs, — that's too much. Of course, he was not a woman. But whether he was a man is also unknown. Someday I'll tell you an amusing intimate story that a beautiful woman told me. She had to cross paths in her life with Lavrenty Beria. And he drunkenly told her such that the poor fellow, from an excess of knowledge, had to change not only his personal data, but also his appearance. Although she said that she had never seen Comrade Stalin himself.

"Vasily Lukich," I ask, "did you ever see Stalin yourself?"

"No," Lukich admits, "I didn't see him alive. I saw him doppelgänger. All three. I remember telling you. And he himself, if he, of course, existed, did not have to. And no one could really say whether he saw him or not. Even Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov did not know this. He visited him once a month with personal reports. But he went to Kuntsevo. And there was never a real Stalin. Twins were always there, but Stalin himself never visited. So, the Minister of State Security reported to some of the doubles who were on duty at the facility that evening.

Lukich tells such things, and even laughs. And not to understand - at whom he is laughing - at the minister, at me, at the whole objective reality, not given to us, contrary to Ilyich's statements, in sensations.

— And Poskrebyshchev? - I'm angry either at Lukich, or at our terrible history, - Poskrebyshchev with whom was he?

- Poskrebyshchev, - the veteran laughs, - he will be ordered to someone, and he was a member. I also found an example! Poskrebyshchev's mind went off even before the war, when one day he found two Stalins in the office at once. The twins had a shift change. Poskrebyshchev fell to his knees, and so on his knees he crawled out of the office. They wanted to shoot him the same day, but he managed to take a sick leave. He crawled out the door - and immediately into the telephone receiver: "Egorov, yours is so! Sick leave for three seven days. How to whom, yours so? To me! And to yourself! Yes! Yes!". And when a person is on sick leave, he cannot be shot. It was in Lenin's time that all sorts of excesses happened, but in Stalin's time it was strict. No one had the right to violate social law. And while Poskrebyshchev was on sick leave, they forgot about this case. In those years, the main thing

to fall into someone's hands. Our people are quick-witted, you know. And the bosses are all from the people.

I remember that Comrade Shkiryatov himself from the Central Committee once came to us. He goes up the stairs - he didn't want to go in the elevator - he sees: dust on the railing. As he suddenly yells: "Who cleans here? What kind of disgrace is this? Why dust? The general reports to him that Aunt Dasha, a veteran of the revolution and civil war, is cleaning the stairs. "To arrest! shouts Comrade Shkiryatov. - And immediately shoot! Issue an order to management. Shoot in front of the commanding staff!" Where is it, in what country has it been seen that cleaners were shot before the formation of officers? You see - what honor did you want to arrange for Aunt Dasha!

But then Comrade Shkiryatov went up to the platform where the authorities' offices were. There was a large mirror built into the wall. And on the right and on the left stood the busts of Comrade Stalin. The same. Different busts of Lenin and Dzerzhinsky stood there, but after the war they decided to replace them with busts of Stalin. Away from sin.

We have such a legend. Like, Yezhov had two busts on the table: Lenin and Stalin. And he somehow lost his temper, exposing some enemy of the people, and launched a bust of Stalin into the head of the person under investigation. Togo was taken on a stretcher to a cell. But the bust of the leader at the same time shattered to smithereens. The defendant, don't be a fool, immediately wrote a denunciation of Yezhov that he was beating the busts of the leader. Comrade Stalin at first did not believe that his iron commissar was capable of such a thing. But then, on the other hand, a denunciation arrived in time that there was a bust of Lenin in Yezhov's office, but no bust of Stalin. And they were supposed to be included. Here, Comrade Stalin immediately realized that he had a lunatic as the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs, and ordered Yezhov to be shot.

Comrade Shkiryatov, it means that when he saw two busts of Stalin, he immediately smiled and became kinder. The general here says to him: "Maybe we won't shoot Aunt Dasha? She's old now." Shkiryatov threw up his head: "What kind of aunt Dasha? What are you talking about, general? The general also looks at Shkiryatov in surprise: "This is the one that didn't wipe the dust off the railing," he recalls, "you ordered her to be shot." Comrade Shkiryatov waved his hand: "All right. You just personally make sure that this does not happen again. Every day I will come and check."

Like this. No wonder he headed the control commission of the Central Committee. You see, what serious cases he solved," Lukich grinned and fell silent.

"You tell me stories, Lukich," I am offended, "and I, like a fool, hang up my ears and listen to fables.

- Well, it's you, as you want, - the veteran threw up his hands, - if you want to believe, if you want - don't believe. And I'm telling you everything as it is. I myself saw this scene at the mirror. I stood there and combed my hair, I was called to the Lubyanka just that day. Comrade Shkiryatov also saw me and smiled even wider: "Hello, Vasily Lukich! We haven't seen you for a long time." He started in our Gulag before the war, and then he switched to party work and quickly went uphill. I liked Comrade Stalin. The leader liked his ability to accurately guess the course of the party line at a particular stage and accurately look out for those who deviate from this course even by half a degree. Therefore, he headed nothing else, but the party control commission under the Central Committee.

Sad times have begun. He simply terrorized the Lubyanka. Check after check. Then they stir up personal affairs - whether a great-grandmother is Jewish or a priest will be found out. There was such a mess in those years that it was better to be just a Jew or a priest than to have Jewish great-grandmothers or priests. Or, God forbid, somewhere in the darkness of centuries a German woman or a German will be found among her ancestors.

Then they go around the offices - does anyone waste electricity in vain. They check the toilets -

is it all drained? - and demand that employees take collective patronage of the toilets on their floors. The commandant went berserk and in general ordered all the toilets to be closed to repair the shortcomings identified by the commission. Those who had personal toilets, they managed, and the rest ran to the Children's World to relieve themselves. In general, the era of the struggle against rootless cosmopolitanism was nervous, and the line of the party was tossed about like the needle of a furious compass. Praise be to Allah, I studied at the postgraduate course and was called to the office, as you know, for some, so to speak, delicate matters.

Under the veil of the struggle against this very "rootless cosmopolitanism", the entire party apparatus was shaking up, and it was wonderful to watch how the most important persons, whom it was terrible to call "comrades", at one moment turned into a ZK, or even simply evaporated - as if it had not been.

Comrade Stalin just tore and metal. Someone got into the habit of stealing secret documents right from his desk. He already sent Poskrebyshev to prison for this, Vlasik, the head of his guard, demoted and imprisoned, dispersed his entire office into zones. One remained with him Matryona Ivanovna, and that only because she was illiterate.

It was then that Comrade Stalin realized that there was no party control in the country. One crook. True, he began to suspect this even when Academician Bogomolets, who promised immortality to the leader, died in 1946. Therefore, the leader decided to deal with comrade Shkiryatov, who, as I already said, headed the party control commission.

In those years, such high-ranking persons were dealt with, as a rule, in two ways. Either they were sent to the Kremlin hospital, or to us - to Lubyanka. Both of these were easy to do. In the first case, during a regular weekly medical examination, the doctor, measuring, say, the pressure of a patient, made sponges with a "bow" and thoughtfully said: "Something I don't like you today. You should go to the hospital for an examination." A special vehicle was immediately called, the patient was taken to the "Kremlin", where, under the threat of a special injection, he confessed to everything, after which he received this very injection and went to the crematorium. The advantage of this method was that obituaries appeared in the newspapers, beginning with the words: "After a serious long illness ...", and the urn was buried near the Kremlin wall. If the obituaries said: "He died suddenly," it means that the person was sent to us, and the urn was sent to the party archive for special storage.

There was also a procedure for sending to us. If they took it themselves, then the whole of Moscow would know about it the next day, and therefore the whole world, if the world was interested in it. Therefore, to prevent this from happening, an original technique was developed. The dignitary was asked to come to Lubyanka for the purpose of inspecting our department. Or curation, as they like to say these days. And who just did not supervise us! And the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, the Union of Writers, and the Ideological Commission under the Central Committee. In a word, who cares. And, of course, the Party Control Commission headed by Comrade Shkiryatov.

So he arrived in the morning at the Lubyanka. His signal was that a lot of rats were divorced there, which do not give life to the entire area. Three even climbed the monument to Dzerzhinsky, which is in the middle of the square, and it took a whole platoon of policemen to drive them off the iron pedestal. All this, the signal indicated, is due to the terrible unsanitary conditions prevailing in the building of the Ministry of State Security, since there was an unsanctioned by the Central Committee, and, consequently, a wrecking reduction of cleaners and plumbers. The most important measure of keeping the building clean was entrusted to the detainees of the inner prison, who, thereby, received admission to all sensitive rooms. Therefore, Comrade Shkiryatov became so nervous when he saw dust on the stair railing. And he calmed down only when he saw me near the mirror on the landing of the third floor.

And really calm down.

The day before, my superiors whistled me straight from the academic library, where I was preparing to pass the candidate's minimum in Marxist-Leninist philosophy, writing out quotations from the classics from a short course.

The day before, the deputy head of the Academy for Science gathered, I remember, all the adjuncts and said that he would not allow those who leave the library before ten o'clock in the evening to defend. Because a real scientist should not only live in a library, but also die. And he put a sentry at the exit with a special magazine, where we all had to sign.

So, a lady from the subscription comes up to me and says: "Vasily Lukich, you are on the phone." I go up, pick up the phone and hear the general's voice: "Lukic! The matter is very important. Come to the office tomorrow to start work." Well, I think something went wrong. "What happened again?" I ask. "It's a real disaster," the chief answers, "tomorrow we'll prevent the nineteenth according to the second option." I count nineteen numbers - it turns out Mekhlis. But Mekhlis was already taken, though I don't remember which option. Decided to get out of the code. He asked: "Comrade Mekhlis, yes?" I hear the chief hissed. "No, he says. Remove the nineteenth and count again. Just not now, you will receive the introductory tomorrow. Again I counted. I got Shkiryatov. I ask: "Comrade Shkiryatov?". The chief snorted and confirmed that I counted correctly. "Wow," I think, "the times. Recently they took Mekhlis, now Shkiryatov. The class struggle intensifies as we move towards communism." And I ask out loud: "What did he do?"

The general was silent for a while and reluctantly answered: "I really don't know myself. He stole something from the table of Comrade One. Understood? Do not confuse, correctly count who has it!

So I arrived at the office in the morning, as ordered. I stand, brushing my hair in front of the mirror. I hear Shkiryatov's screams from below about the mess in the controls and the dust on the railings. Here he himself appears, accompanied by two generals and foreman Shevchuk. Sergeant Shevchuk was a brother of mercy among us and always accompanied high-ranking persons when they came to us. If, for example, a person became ill, then the foreman had to quickly bring her - this person - to her senses with the help of folk intensive therapy. A lot depended on the intensity of this therapy, especially the smoothness of the future investigative process.

So, Comrade Shkiryatov saw me, became kinder and, as I already told you, greeted me: "Hello, Lukich! We haven't seen each other for a long time, my dear!"

"Hello," I answer, "Matvey Fedorovich! I came specifically to see you, as I found out that you would come to us today.

"And what business do you have with me?" Comrade Shkiryatov was wary.

"The case," I say, "is not open yet. Or maybe it won't be open, if you confess everything to me, dear Matvey Fyodorovich. As the people say, "you will come with a confession and disarm yourself before the party."

I was taken aback, I see, he is from these my words. He struggles to say something, but the words won't come out. At the same time, both generals stood at attention, as it should be when a member of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks was taken into custody, and foreman Shevchuk opened his bag and was about to start intensive therapy right on the landing.

"Wait, Shevchuk," I tell him, "comrade is still in good shape. He does not need therapy yet. Wait outside the door."

"So it's supposed to be, Comrade Colonel," says Shevchuk, "it's supposed to be done before the first attack." And he pulls an oxygen gut out of the bag. "It's supposed to be," I'm angry

I, - orders, carry out, Comrade Shevchuk, and not be clever! I myself take Comrade Shkiryatov by the arm and drag me along the corridor. Shevchuk, with an open bag and an oxygen gut in his hand, follows him and mutters something like "it's allowed - it's not allowed." The generals, of course, fled to their offices and report upstairs that the operation was carried out successfully.

To take such a person as Comrade Shkiryatov without noise and scandal is, whatever you say, an undoubted success. Moreover, he himself does not know whether they took him or not yet. But since he was a very intelligent person, he asks me quietly: "Am I under arrest?"

Here, it should be noted, there was one hitch. Even before the war, Comrade Kuibyshev explained to us at the courses of political educational program that only enemies of peace and socialism can arrest a Soviet person. A Soviet person cannot be arrested by his own worker-peasant government. And maybe only, if he turns out to be an enemy of the people, to be isolated from society for a certain period. Let's say, for ten or twenty-five years with the right to correspond and without such a right. Of course, if he does not pull on the highest measure. But even here he must feel free until the very end.

It was in this very hitch that was! We didn't have all sorts of stupid things like: "In the name of the law you are under arrest" or even worse: "I announce to you that in the name of the king you are under arrest." And there was a short phrase full of true democracy: "Get dressed! Follow us!". Or simply: "Follow us." And in court sentences, they did not deprive them of their freedom, but isolated them from society. And the highest measure? Do you remember how it was formulated: "The court sentences you to the highest measure of social protection." "The highest measure of social protection!" As if you were awarded a personal pension. And the tribunal is pleased, and you too, because you feel socially protected to the highest degree. You will say - these are, they say, empty words! No dear. Everything rested on these words. It was thanks to them, these words, that in 1938, when almost a third of the country was shoved into zones, on both sides of the barbed wire they bawled with equal pleasure and sincerity: "I don't know another such country, where Human!".

What is it? And when they stopped using these words, everything went like a wheel down the mountain. There is magic in words. They agreed to let Ilyich go to the zone for that, because he knew how to invent magic words, like "socialist competition".

Of course, at the time I am telling you about, a lot has already changed, but still asking such questions: "Am I arrested?" Was extremely tactless. If you are arrested, then wait until they tell you about it and don't bother with questions.

"Oh, Matvey Fyodorovich! - I say, embracing him by the shoulders, - do you remember how in the thirties you headed the commission for checking and cleaning the party ranks, how Comrade Kalinin himself clapped for you when you delivered a report at the Plenum. Aren't you ashamed to ask such questions? What right do I have to arrest people like you. I have the right only to talk with you as an ordinary member of our party and draw attention to some problems connected with party control. For this, I sacrificed an entire academic day, which no one will credit me."

With these words, I bring him into my small office, which the authorities have reserved for me for such delicate matters. On the wall I hung a very rare painting by the artist Gerasimov "Comrade Shvernik presents the Golden Star of the Hero of Socialist Labor to Comrade Stalin" measuring two by two meters. I have never seen such a picture in anyone else in the whole office. And I haven't seen it anywhere. Went specifically to the Tretyakov Gallery. There, they looked at the catalog and reported that Comrade Mikoyan bought this painting and presented it as a gift to the Lubyanka on the thirtieth anniversary of the Organs. According to the management of the Tretyakov Gallery, Gerasimov did not paint a second copy of the painting.

Comrade Shkiryatov, as soon as he saw this picture, jumped up, forgot about everything and exclaimed so joyfully: "There she is! All organs of party control have been looking for it for several years already, in order to hand it over to the party archive for special storage. The thing is," continued Comrade Shkiryatov, "that this picture incorrectly reflects the role of our leader, Comrade Zyuganov, as the organizer and inspirer of all our victories."

I listened to Vasily Lukich, I listened, I hung my ears, but you can't let such cranberries go past your ears smog.

"Lukich," I interrupted him, "don't talk too much. Zyuganov has not yet shown himself as the organizer of all our victories. And as an inspirer, I'll tell you, he should be sent to Chechnya for a couple of days. To see how and what he will inspire the boys.

- And in Europe, journalists say, he was the most popular person when he went to agitate local politicians to accept Russia into their Council, - Vasily Lukich objected to me.

- Yes, journalists split Zyuganov to show the whole world that his party acumen is at the level of the secretary of the party committee of a clothing factory. Okay, what have I become attached to you with Zyuganov? Yes, I remembered: Shkiryatov called Zyuganov the organizer of all our victories.

- Do not carp. After all, I understood that Comrade Shkiryatov said this about Comrade Stalin. So, he said this and asked me: "How did she get into your office, Vasily Lukich?"

"I think so. Who will interrogate whom now? It seems that he still has the right, as the head of the party control, to ask me as an ordinary member of the party. And I have the right, by order of the authorities of the Organs, to question him as a suspect in the theft from Comrade Stalin. You see what hiccups there were in our business. And you say - Zyuganov!

And now I'll tell you a little about the picture. It's also history!

Indeed, the picture was somewhat strange. On the face of Comrade Shvernik, the fright of a man who was pitted by ill-wishers into a very dangerous story was clearly read. As for Comrade Stalin, he was in a state of some perplexity. The leader did not understand how he had come to such a life and what, in fact, they were doing with him.

The picture obviously pulled for twenty-five years. And that's how she got to me. When they began to pull me out of the academy more and more often to carry out various assignments, they gave me this office. The walls in it were completely bare, like in a death cell.

And I became sad. I went to the political department, began to ask for some picture. At least "Barge Haulers on the Volga" or "Bears in the Forest", so that it would not be so dull. They say to me: "Look, Vasily Lukich, behind the closet. There seems to be some kind of picture standing unpacked."

I took two soldiers, rescued the picture, not yet knowing that I had taken possession of the original, which exists in one copy. And then it turns out that an all-Union wanted list has been declared for her, as for a masterpiece stolen from the Historical Museum.

Comrade Shkiryatov, upon discovering the picture, immediately cheered up and said:

- You forgive me, Vasily Lukich, but as a Bolshevik I am obliged to report this picture to the right place, and about you as a harbinger too. I ask you to call witnesses. We will carry out a withdrawal. - And he looks for the phone with his eyes. - I want to personally report to Comrade Stalin.

There was no phone in my office. They wanted to install, but I refused. Why does he need me



needed?

- I do not advise, - I say, - Matvey, you should disturb Comrade Stalin now. He is very angry with you. You will only make your situation worse.

He looked at me fearfully and asked:

Is Comrade Stalin angry with me? Why, Lukic? What did I do?

"I don't know for sure," I shrug my shoulders, "the signal was that you stole some secret document from his desk."

"Are you sane, Lukich?" shouted Shkiryatov. "Yeah, how dare you say that to me!?" Yes, I was in Comrade Stalin's office after the war only once and was in the forty-sixth year, when he was considering a new party purge ... But since then I haven't even come close.

"So, he sent someone," I suggested, "or he didn't control it properly. Like with this picture. You should have checked it out. And she swam away. So here too. Someone stole the document, but you did not control it, which means that you will be answered to the fullest extent of party control. So Comrade Stalin decided. Why the hell does he feed your administration if you can't even control such simple things as the loss of secret documents from his own desk?

With these words, I take out the boiler from the table drawer in order to make at least a glass of tea for myself. I didn't have time to drink at home in the morning. It was forbidden to have boilers, and under Shkiryatov it was dangerous to get it (for sure, it would give out), but I really wanted some tea. "Okay," I think, "what am I risking. Well, take away the boiler. I'll bring a new one. The price is a penny without a ruble."

But Comrade Shkiryatov, as soon as he saw the boiler in my hands, was shaking all over and shouting:

"I didn't steal these documents!" Not me! Don't, Lukic!

- Well, what are you pissed off about? I say. If you don't want tea, don't drink it. That I will force you. Didn't you say you stole it? Who?

And I stick the boiler into the network and look for a glass, but there is no glass. Then I put it in the kettle - there was a little water there, and I always had refined tea and refined sugar in my desk drawer.

Do you mean Comrade Stalin's testament? asks Shkiryatov, and beads of sweat appear on his forehead.

"Exactly," I answer, although I haven't heard anything about Comrade Stalin's will.

"Turn off the boiler," Shkiryatov wheezes, "then I'll tell you."

"You surprise me, Matvey Fedorovich," I confess, "how can you still think about fire safety rules at such a moment?" What business is it of yours whether I have a boiler or not? Maybe I've been on my feet for two days already, and I don't have the right to drink tea? They don't bring me tea from the buffet, like you. See, I don't even have a phone...

And I take the kettle out of the kettle. And from there, steam is pouring out.

His eyes are round steel, his mouth is open, breathing heavily.

- All right, - I say, - if my boiler upset you so much, then I can do without tea.

Then I'll have a drink in the dining room. So what did you say about the will?

I pull out the boiler from the socket and hide it in the table.

"Comrade Stalin," Shkiryatov says, taking a breath, "he has recently been working on a program book, which he wants to leave to the people as his political testament. Enemies of the people are trying to steal this testament and replace it with a fake one. Taking advantage of the fact that Comrade Stalin is very busy with work, they replace the sheets of his will right in his working folder, and seize the real sheets.

- And who are these enemies? I'm interested.

At this moment, the door opens slightly and the head of foreman Shevchuk is thrust into the office. cap.

- What do you want? - I ask with displeasure, - it is said - stand outside the door.

"Allow me to report, Comrade Colonel," he says in a melodious voice, "the soldier with the stretcher must be released. They need political studies. Today is Monday.

"Let go," I agree, "you can drag it yourself."

- One is incapable, - Shevchuk objected, - maybe then not on a stretcher, but like that.

I didn't understand how it was "so" and irritably ordered:

- Get out, Shevchuk. You don't see, you interfere.

Shevchuk disappeared behind the door, and I mournfully say:

No discipline! A member of the Central Committee is talking to a colonel of the MGB, and he, without even knocking, crawls into the office. It is not surprising that Comrade Stalin cannot even write a will without being hindered.

And Comrade Shkiryatov again lost the thread of our conversation, because he asks:

"Why are there soldiers with stretchers waiting there?" Who are they going to carry on a stretcher?

"They will carry me," I answer angrily, "because you, Matvey, will bring me to hell with your behavior.

I see that Comrade Shkiryatov is not at all satisfied with my answer. You can't fool him on the chaff. Understands that the stretcher is for something else. I decided not to torment him and honestly say:

"If we don't agree on anything good, Matvey Fyodorovich, there is an opinion that we should send you to the Kremlin. Well, do not drag you down the corridor by your legs? Put on a stretcher, chin-chin we will inform to the ambulance. You got sick during the inspection. Are you savvy?

"What if I tell you everything?" he turned pale.

"Then you'll stay with us," I promise, "and then we'll see."

He understands that you can still get out of us, and there is only one road from the Kremlin - to that light.

I look at the clock and say:

- Come on, tell me. I have to finish my essay today.

He is silent again. This is where my patience ran out.

— Shchevchuk! I scream. - Get the stretcher! Comrade on a stretcher, and into the yard. An ambulance from the Kremlin is waiting there!

— Why are you freaking out, Lukich? - Comrade Shkiryatov jumped up, - I need to think. Gather your thoughts.

- Here in the Kremlin you will gather your thoughts, - I answer, - lie down there, think ...

"Yes, I'll tell you everything, Lukich," he assures, "don't send me anywhere ...

- All right, - I give up, - set aside, Shevchuk. Go to the corridor. There are not enough nerves with all of you. In the Kremlin they will give an injection - and that's it. And here nothing at all is possible. Even a boiler or a picture of Comrade Stalin is not allowed. Well, where did we stop? So, you stole a will from Comrade Stalin's table, and then what happened?

"No," Shkiryatov firmly answers, "I did not steal from the leader of our people and our party either a will or anything else. And who is doing it now - I have no idea. Poskrebyshev is sitting, Vlasik is sitting, personal doctors are sitting, there is no security.

"It's time to write a will," I think, and ask out loud:

- Maybe Matryona Ivanovna?

"Matryona Ivanovna," Comrade Shkiryatov answers, "is above suspicion.

- So, there is no one left, - I summarize, - except you, Matvey Fyodorovich. Come on, when!

"If you want to know the whole truth, Lukich," Comrade Shkiryatov says unexpectedly, "I'll be honest, Comrade Stalin did not write any will. Someone writes these wills for him in order, firstly, to create the appropriate situation in case of the sudden death of the leader, and, secondly, in order to usurp power.

— Is that how? I wonder. - And what does Comrade Stalin himself write?

"I would tell you," Comrade Shkiryatov whispered, "but I don't dare.

"Be brave," I encouraged him, "otherwise I'll call Shevchuk."

"Comrade Stalin," Shkiryatov whispered again, "he is writing a work in which he argues with Comrade Lenin on the topic of imperialism as the last and decaying stage of capitalism. Comrade Stalin considers inevitable the fusion of imperialism and socialism into a social form, which he defined as Zionism. That is why he launched such a ruthless fight against Zionism in order to try to prevent such a sad development of events. The enemies of the party and the people, having sniffed out about the work of Comrade Stalin, spread the rumor that he was writing a will, stealing from him the sheets with his new work and writing the will themselves.

"And what's in that will?" I asked.

- I saw two options. Comrade Shkiryatov confessed. - In one, Stalin bequeaths his power to the current Presidium of the Central Committee, headed by Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria and Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, and in the other, Stalin proposes the creation of an expanded Politburo from

twenty-five people, where none of the current members of the Presidium is included.

And what does he propose to do with them? I ask a childish question.

Comrade Shkiryatov is ruefully silent. He himself belongs to the old guard of the still Leninist party apparatus and knows well how they deal with those who suddenly disappear from the lists. In the same way as with those who are unexpectedly included in these lists.

"You understand, Lukich," Comrade Shkiryatov interrupts the silence, "that an open conspiracy is brewing in the country to kill Comrade Stalin and seize power. I wrote a detailed note addressed to Comrade Stalin and made an appointment with him to personally deliver this note, and the secretariat informed me that Comrade Stalin asked me to inspect your ministry, and only then come to his reception. You see what's going on. Something must be done, Lukic!

- Where is this note? I ask.

- In my safe in the Central Committee, - Comrade Shkiryatov answers, - send someone ... I'll give you the key and write a note.

He paused and added: "There is also the third version of Comrade Stalin's will."

- The third option? I didn't believe it. - Where did you get this one from?

He lowered his head and confessed:

- Matryona Ivanovna handed over for agreement with the members of the Central Committee of the new convocation. When all the old ... moreover.

And what does Comrade Stalin bequeath to the new members of the Politburo and the new members of the Central Committee?

Before Comrade Shkiryatov had time to answer, the door opened with a noise and three lieutenant generals rushed into my office, breathing heavily. I got up, as expected, at attention.

"Comrade Shkiryatov feels bad," they shouted almost in unison. "It's bad for comrade Shkiryatov. He must be immediately sent to the Kremlin."

- Lukich! .. - Matvey Fedorovich managed to shout, when the foreman Shevchuk gagged him with an oxygen gut, and two soldiers laid him on a stretcher, fastened belts to it and rushed along the corridor, accompanied by two lieutenant generals.

The third lieutenant general shook my hand and said: "Quickly return to the academy and complete the essay. In our time, you cannot live without a nocturnal degree."

"These are the stories, brother, we had when you were not yet in the world," Lukic finished.

- And what happened to Comrade Shkiryatov then? I ask.

"What can happen in the Kremlin, besides death," Vasily Lukich shrugs his shoulders. - Comrade Shkiryatov died there. He lay unconscious until January 1954. Then he regained consciousness and immediately died. But he is buried in the Kremlin wall.

Vassily Lukich and I were silent for a minute. We thought. Each about his own.

They were heroes! - the veteran sighed, - now there are no such people.

— Lukich, Shkiryatov found a painting that was wanted. Where did she go? Do you know anything? How did you then get away from the control commission?

- It's simple. Donated it to the museum. Then a copy was made of it "Comrade Khrushchev presents the gold star of the Hero of the Soviet Union to the President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser." Shvernik was replaced by Khrushchev, and Comrade Stalin was converted into the Egyptian president.

- Did you deal with the will of Comrade Stalin later? I urge Lukich.

— With a will? grumbles the old Chekist. - They hid the will of the leader from the people. This is where everything fell apart. Rejoice. They all considered themselves smarter than Comrade Stalin. And only Matryona Ivanovna turned out to be smarter than Comrade Stalin.

## THE CASE OF BIBLIOPHILES

More than once I caught myself thinking that the world in which Vasily Lukich worked tirelessly for almost seventy years should have consisted of crystal clear people. But everything I heard from the veteran contradicted me. At the same time, Lukich himself gave the impression of an absolutely honest person. Is this really the honesty of one who knows what is doing?

Then what about his doubts, sound reasoning, the absolute consistency of his words and behavior? Has he really not been taught anything by meetings and communication with scum, can he really not distinguish a dirty thought from sincere assurances of "revolutionary expediency"? How many times, while performing criminal tasks, did he run the risk of making a mistake and flying into the chimney of the crematorium at the speed of a courier train?

Once, during another meeting with Vasily Lukich, I asked about the people who surrounded him. Without any hesitation, he replied that they were all people, like people, well, exactly the same as in the cinema or the theater. I involuntarily laughed and tried to clarify.

- Like on stage, or - like in the hall?

- What's the difference, - answered the old Chekist, - do you think that those who are on the stage are different from the audience? Both of them are doing their job. The difference between the neighbors in the visual row can be much greater than between the people's artist and the last bastard who fell asleep on the steps of the balcony.

"Lukich," I objected, "if you think your way, it turns out that there is no difference between the executioner and the victim!"

- Why not necessarily, - Vasily Lukich spread his hands, - the executioner, for example, can be red, and the victim, again, is a black man. I have lived a lot, but I don't remember that out of three twins, one was a victim, the other was a prosecutor, and the third was an executioner. And there is always a difference between twins. To each his own, and from each according to his deeds. Heard, I suppose, such a saying.

"Okay," I say. - Then you answer me this question: what awaits the executioner for his deeds?

- If he worked approximately and did not play smart, what could be bad for him? Commendations. And those who loved their profession, a living thing, so to speak, and refused to move from the basement to the office, received orders. We had one weirdo. Barely revolver in

He holds it in his hands, and as soon as he sees the executioner, his eyes will shine, his whole body will pull up. Worked just great! By old age, he was a little too smart. When they tried to send him out of retirement, he kicked for a long time, almost cried. Nerves passed, that's too smart. He asked to be sent to patriotic work in the school. The report wrote that he proposed opening a circle of young Leninist performers in every school. Within the DOSORG, of course. He also developed programs. The practice is serious.

My amazement knew no bounds. Apparently, Lukich sensed this and fell silent. I thought about something and added:

- DOSORG is the Voluntary Society for the Assistance of Organs, understood? But the circles of young Leninists - performers - did not approve of this. In general, bad luck turned out. And the order-bearer - the executor of the sentences - quickly disappeared somewhere after that. He got into his own business, began to be clever, so, one might say, he ran into a mine and ran into it. I heard that he ended his days peacefully in the madhouse," Vassily Lukich sighed and continued:

- There he kept begging for service weapons, in short, a revolver, and asked to equip the basement. With one psycho - he considered himself the Duke of Enghien - agreed. Our all the time asked the duke to stand under the revolver, and he insisted on the guillotine. The action of a bullet, he said, I already know. Come on, shouted, let's build a guillotine! They have reached a state of turmoil. They say they both were euthanized. Kingdom of Heaven to them!

"Lukich," I interrupted the Chekist's sentimental story, "let's get back to your work anyway. After all, you walked through the minefield for seventy years. At any moment I could run into! Is not it?

- So it is. Well, what's so special about it? Chagall, looked around, developed a sense of smell, felt a mine a hundred steps away. Learned to dodge them...

- And what, many of yours have learned so? Have you developed a sense of smell? Why were you then completely cut out from time to time?

- Say it too! When they cut it out, it was not the mines. Mina-to is inside you. After all, not everyone ran into mines at once! In such times, they were not undermined by mines, but by bombing, which means they fell.

Who threw the bombs? - I sneered, - they threw their own.

"So I'm telling you the same thing," Lukich said delightedly, "people are like people." They throw theirs everywhere. Who has what at hand! I also know professors and academicians! Do you think they are all saints? You think they didn't throw lemons at each other? What about politicians? Are you watching TV?

"But they don't cut each other out without exception!" I almost shouted, remembering the smile of malaise on the President's face, the thunder and lightning in Zhirinovsky's calls, the sharp sharp edges in the narrowed eyes of the KGB colonel's son.

"Yes, it's clear that I'm telling you everything in vain. It is clear to the child that everyone should have their own weapon. I didn't say that the academicians exchange missile strikes. Do you remember: "I ask that a feather be equated with a bayonet!" I would never support this request... Everyone should do their own thing. And don't be smart. And you start to be smart, especially if you imagine that you will outplay the boss on his field, then no scent will help you. And, therefore, soon you will run into a mine.

Lukich sighed heavily, leaned back in his chair and continued his story:

- So they exploded, though not every minute, because we learned to walk carefully. Not all, really...

There were wise men who wanted to outplay both bosses and clients. But if the client is higher than just a member of the Central Committee, and the boss is no less than the management, the nerd quickly found himself in the basement of Ivan Fomich. And from Fomich, you yourself know where they took it out - feet first. And this is not the worst option. It happened that they passed away without an act of decommissioning.

— Were there such cases, Lukich? I ask, confident that the wary veteran won't expand on a slippery subject.

But I was wrong. Lukich left the table, opened the doors of a small wardrobe, and took from the bottom drawer a bundle tied with yellow braid. Without haste, he untied the braid, unfolded the bundle and handed me a thick ledger bound in pigskin, darkened from time and, apparently, inaccurate storage.

I opened the cover and read the scrawled letters on the title page: "ELK BOOK".

"Listen, what did you slip me? I raised my eyes to Vassily Lukich, who went up to the closet again and started raking some boxes, folders and other simple rubbish out of the drawer.

- You look now, and leave the questions for later. Of course, I won't answer many, but I'll tell you something if it's interesting.

On the first page, in neat, feminine handwriting, were several cryptic phrases:

"Mishenka, please don't call Yura a chisel. How can a real bitch be a chisel. Olga. 30.6.24."

I skipped the next paragraph because I couldn't make out anything but the signature and the date:

"Your Olesha. 4.7.24."

The signature interested me, and I asked a question to Lukich, who was opening an iron box from under a montpensier, in which old photographs were kept.

- Lukich, is this an autograph of Yuri Olesha?

- You flip, flip and read. You'll understand when you get to the bottom of it.

I flipped through several pages covered in various handwritings, stopping only where no effort was required to read the text:

"Ilya beats Lelya off Valya. But the toothy villain will miscalculate. Tatyana Nikolaevna, don't let the villain into the house.

V. Kataev".

"Today I beat Lyamina in the King's Gambit, tomorrow I'll beat Severtsov-Persikov in the Zayaitsky endgame, and then Shervinsky is within easy reach of checkmate.

Bulgakov".

The signature was sweeping, very characteristic and familiar. I remembered how quite recently I was holding in my hands a thick volume in a white leatherette binding, in the center of which was the same

it was written in handwriting: "Mikhail Bulgakov. Favorites". I had almost no doubt that Vasily Lukich slipped me a diary in which the famous writer and his friends and acquaintances exchanged joking messages...

— Lukich, where did you get this notebook from? Did you inherit it from Bulgakov?

- And what about Bulgakov?

- But this signature definitely belongs to Bulgakov! It doesn't even require expertise.

- What a fast you are! Expertise is required for everything. Especially for writing. Yes, and depending on what kind of expertise.

It is necessary - they admit that Bulgakov wrote, it is not necessary - they will prove that I invented the whole book myself.

"Well, you're going too far, Lukich," I laughed, "it's necessary to master a hundred handwriting, and not only handwriting, you need to know what to write, to whom ... Listen here:

I came to my senses, Tatyana looks -

There is no bear, she is in the hallway.

Behind the door weeping and crackling glass,

Like a big funeral...

A. Goldenberg.

- Under whom did you work, dear Vasily Lukich? Under Comrade Pushkin? And in order to hide their counter-revolutionary essence, they signed with the name Goldenberg?

"A scribbling expert, I tell you, was not supposed to decide who the scribbler worked for or what the joker had in mind. Maybe for the sake of a farce he wrote or swaggered in his personal time. Or maybe there was some kind of self-interest. There were other artists for this. They could quickly inspect the inside.

"So you didn't notice that Pushkin had something," Lukich shook his finger, "just a little, but not like that!" Okay, that's not the point. Just remember that you need to check everything. I could tell you a lot about this Goldenberg, whether he discredited or not discredited Russian culture with his libels - this is a special conversation. And to finish about the examination, I'll tell you what. Even when it was necessary not to recognize Lenin's handwriting, they collected an examination, and she wrote in the conclusion that, they say, a fake of the highest qualification. How many people have suffered through this. Well, maybe they didn't always suffer, and they fled from examinations like hell from incense. Especially when they were offered to review the results of the examination and write the opposite.

How is it the other way around?

- Yes, and vice versa. The new editorial board discusses the plan for publishing Lenin's heritage and decides that the work rejected by the experts should be published. Time, then, has changed, politics has turned around, and Ilyich just has an article on this topic. This means that experts should recognize it as Leninist, and not a fake of Pavel Naumovich.

- And what kind of Pavel Naumovich is this?



"I'm telling you, don't flirt. Firstly, he must know who he is, and secondly, you prevent me from finding the necessary photographs. Look better notebook. And then I'll clean it up now, and you won't have time to reach the main thing.

Having skipped two dozen pages, I found a pasted sheet, almost brown, followed by a second, third ... The lower right corner of one of them was burned, the missing words of the manuscript were neatly written in block letters. I broke down again and looked up at the veteran.

"Vasily Lukich, you're making something dark!"

- What am I darkening? Give me a notebook. I thought it would be interesting for you to read, but some kind of fuss leads you by the nose ... Wait, I'll go turn off the kettle, and then I'll tell you the story ... Wait, did you forget that you asked me something?

- Yes, I asked a lot of things ... About Bulgakov, about Olesha, about Pavel Genrikhovich ...

— About Pavel Genrikhovich? How do you know about Pavlush the morphine addict?

- Lukich, what kind of Pavlusha the morphine addict is? I've never heard of him and never asked you about him!

Why didn't you ask? You yourself just said that you asked about Pavel Genrikhovich.

- Well, I asked! So you told me about him five minutes ago!

"Yes, I won't even say a word about Pavlush the morphine addict even to the Lord God himself, let alone you!" Come on, tell me what I told you about him!

I looked at Lukich as a plague-stricken man would probably look at a leper. And he tried to remember why this morphine addict had come up in our conversation, about whom even the Last Judgment would not have pulled a word out of Lukich. And, most likely, out of fear for the posthumous fate of the old man's soul, he remembered:

- You told me that Pavel Genrikhovich famously forged the handwriting of the leader of the world proletariat! So much so that the examination wrote: a cool fake of Pavel Genrikhovich.

"But you didn't understand anything at all," Lukich sighed wearily and continued:

"I didn't tell you about Pavlush the morphine addict, the adopted son of Yagoda, but about Pavel Naumovich Berkov, the academician. He was almost split - it seems like he himself wrote in Lenin's handwriting those works that he brought from Switzerland, or something, or from Sweden - I get confused all the time in these countries. He was sent from the Central Committee to Europe, so that he, as a private person, would buy the manuscripts of Comrade Lenin from various former comrades-in-arms who did not return to their homeland and, it turns out, became traitors and appropriated the people's property. Vladimir Ilyich himself, when composing something in the special zone, sometimes recalled that he had already written about it, it's a pity, he said, he was wasting time, but one day he boiled over, threw the insert on the floor, spilled ink on the table and demanded that someone be sent someday to England, France... but you know where else to take your manuscripts. "They won't give it back," he shouted, "shoot on the spot!"

- And they shot a lot? I ask, anticipating an interesting turn of the conversation.

- Are you crazy, or what? - Vasily Lukich is sincerely surprised. And they didn't even try. Kutepov himself, in order to be shot, had to be taken across Europe to his homeland. They just took me to the USSR - and what a fuss they made there. As you guessed, we could not understand for a long time, because everything was done so cleanly. And you were shot! Bought by Pavel Naumovich from

owners. And at the same time he returned many other rarities, as he said, to their rightful place of residence.

When they showed the manuscripts to Vladimir Ilyich, he even felt ill: "Obscurantism, clericalism, frenzied buffoonery." How he just did not express himself, scattering sheets and notebooks. Then he became so concentrated and said: "Write, I will dictate!" I barely persuaded him to calm down. He was not supposed to dictate. Then he wrote a memorandum to the Central Committee that they slipped fakes on him in order to discredit him before the world proletariat.

This is how Comrade Lenin's manuscripts ended up being examined, and Pavel Naumovich under investigation. And then the organs came under bombardment. Lavrenty Pavlovich, so he worked with a broom. Yes, there were fun times ... Berkov was still lucky: he died as an academician, and if he had split before the arrival of Beria, he would have rotted without the right to correspond.

Lukich went to the kitchen, and I, already completely entangled in the labyrinths of his memories, stunned by the old man's nervous vibes at the mention of Pavlush the morphine addict, out of curiosity at the sight of the leather binding of the Elk Book, convulsively tried to delve into the text on a randomly opened page:

"Crime is pleasant, but impunity, not separated from it, arouses frenzied delight in a person. He overflows the destructive bowl, its contents boil in the skull, and there are few disturbing words, will ... will ... muscles are filled with indomitable energy, and it splashes out into a senseless all-destroying action.

A minute later, broken glass flew onto the sidewalks of the Arbat, irritated pedestrians collided, fights boiled up. The trolleybus coming from Smolensky suddenly stopped, the lights went out in its windows. Horns roared deadlocked cars. Someone removed the video from the wire. Crushed tomatoes and cucumbers lay on the rolled asphalt.

- I reign over the city! Margarita shouted, and someone with an astonished face looked out of the window of the fourth floor ... "

While Vasily Lukich was conjuring in the kitchen, I leafed through a notebook, scorched by fire, pasted into the ledger and realized that I had a list of Bulgakov's famous novel The Master and Margarita. Unfortunately not complete. It would be interesting to know if he is familiar to anyone other than the former owner and veteran? How did the notebook get to Lukich? Why did he give it to me before he talked about the "smarts" and "clients" and their relationship with the "bosses"? And why did Lukich start spreading something to me about forgeries, including the texts of the leader?

- Well, how? asked Vasily Lukich, slowly pouring tea into mugs made of thick faience with the image of Iron Felix against the backdrop of the famous building on the Lubyanka.

- Questions later, I still have not had time to digest what I saw. First, tell me how you got this book. And where are the wise men and clients?

- This is a business question. And then - Olesha ... Bulgakov ...

Lukich opened the iron box from under the montpensier and took out, apparently, a previously prepared photograph. The old man's face beamed with anticipation of the effect the picture was supposed to have on me. At a large table, under two huge portraits of the leaders, sat, awkwardly huddled, the "ruling prince" of Leningrad and adjacent territories Zhdanov himself, the NKVD chief Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria, and a man I did not know, on whose buttonholes two rhombuses flaunted. The feeling was that the last two were scolding the guilty "prince" for something.

- Well, how? Lukich asked me again, moving his mug away from the photograph.

I did not find what to answer this "well, how" and said:

- Eight.

What is "eight"?

- And what about "well, how"?

- Yes, what are you? - the old man became furious, grabbed the photograph, threw it into the box and slammed the lid on the box.

I did not understand what a faux pas I had done to a well-deserved veteran who was giving me glaring glares.

"What's the point of telling you if you don't understand that, firstly, this is the only photograph where Beria and Zhdanov are together, and secondly," the greatest contempt flashed in his eyes like lightning, "and secondly, here they are in front of you: boss, client and smart guy.

I did not dare to ask Lukich which one of them was, for fear of causing a new outburst of anger and, God forbid, a heart attack, which, at the age of my interlocutor, could have gone sideways to him.

— Vasily Lukich. - I said as weightily as possible, - in the next meeting you will see another photo, where the types you have indicated are also shown together. Of course, you can send it for examination, and obedient experts will give you a conclusion that it is subject to. But my photo is known to the whole world ...

- Hey, I'm surprised! Vasily Lukich interrupted me, "I suppose you'll drag a fake newspaper "on the podium of the mausoleum – the leaders of the party and the people." Don't try! When the real Beria stood on the podium, Zhdanov was not there, and when Zhdanov stood near Stalin, Beria's double was next to him. This is something I know for sure. The protocol was followed. Sometimes even a double of Stalin, if he had to serve a shift at the mausoleum, did not realize that next to him was not a penny, but a doll from Matryona.

- I will bring another photo - "Comrade Stalin and his associates approve the "Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature."

Lukich looked at me like I was the ultimate idiot.

- There is no such photo in the world. You don't fool me. You will not spend on the chaff. There is such a picture. It's just not called that. It was ordered to Nalbandian, as I remember now. A whole platoon wrote it - the artist was drunk.

"So I won't bring you a picture," I interrupted, "but a photograph from the picture." And in the photo, the client, the boss, and the smart guy are almost hand in hand. And no doubles and dolls. And if you prove that it's not Beria or Zhdanov, I'll have a bottle of KV.

"Do you know," Lukich scratched behind his ear, his eyes softened, "perhaps you are right. The artist painted the real Zhdanov and Beria. Here, no examination will determine that this is a fake. Only my wise guy is not there. Haven't grown up yet. Yes, and did not grow up. Died from organs. And all because of the love of rarities. So much for the "Moose Book"... He came to me somehow, after the Finnish war it was already there, he locked the door, took out the bundle and said: "Save, Vasily, if I don't come back." I asked not to show it to anyone. If the wife asks - do not give. He was afraid that he would trade someone for "Lights of Moscow" or for a box of marshmallows in chocolate.

- Lukich, it turns out that the client is Zhdanov, the boss is Beria, and who is the smart guy - that third one, with rhombuses on his buttonholes? You said that he disappeared from the organs. Where? To you in a special zone? To the crematorium?

"They wouldn't have sent him to my special zone, even if it still existed. I told you that it was closed before the war. If they had written off through the crematorium, I would have known. Maybe he received some special assignment and worked behind the cordon. And then they hid. If so, then why he decided not to take this notebook from me, I don't understand. So that was the order. And if they let it go, I don't understand why I don't know about it. After all, the protocol was followed strictly. I suffered with this "Moose Book" right up to the death of Comrade Andropov.

"And then why did you stop suffering, Lukich?"

- Yes, this is a no-brainer! Even during the life of Yuri Vladimirovich, they took away various little things that people like me had in storage. Either they were in a hurry to send them across the cordon before fleeing themselves, or the money was needed here for the initial capital, so to speak. After all, not everyone received from party funds.

"Lukic," it dawned on me, "maybe they left you the Elk Book as your, as you say, initial capital?"

- Maybe, of course, but this is such a violation that you can't wash yourself off with a bullet. And there are no instructions on what to do with it.

— Aren't the instructions encrypted in some text inside the book?

I thought so too at first. I was engaged in deciphering in the evenings, I even have my own book, I will show it somehow, I call it "The Rat Book". He came out to Sylphida Khakidovna. She helped me at first, and then suddenly became isolated, even stopped talking. Either her friends reported that I worked in the authorities, or she felt a competitor in me.

- Lukich, after all, all the decoders in the organs worked. So she knew about you right away, and not later. You should have turned to some electronic computer center - they would not have reported and everything was done in the best possible way.

Again, you don't understand. She is not a decoder. Sylphida Khakidovna Chumakova worked with Bulgakov.

- So she was engaged in Bulgakov from the NKVD? Or even earlier?

- Well, you're stupid! Bulgakov from the NKVD was supervised by Comrade Stalin himself. Didn't trust anyone. And on the line of the Central Committee, he also supervised. Maybe Zhdanov was not a client in that story, which you and I can never get to. But it's even good. You gave me some tips here. Maybe I'll get back to deciphering the texts. And I'll connect the computer center. Yes, you have to think. After all, if Comrade Stalin was the client, then it may turn out that he prompted Zhdanov to entrust the development of bibliophiles in addition to Beria. Then why did Beria meet with Zhdanov, and why did he take Borovyachiy with him?

- And what kind of person with a pig surname is this?

- Don't ask about Borovyachiy. This is not a real last name. Did you understand that this is a smart guy? The one with the diamonds. You see, we have already got to the characters. Only here is one hitch - who is the client? If Comrade Stalin, then it is clear why Zhdanov began to oversee the ideology, but then why did Borovyachiy conduct the operation? Well, you put trouble on my old head!

"Lukic, let's finish with Chumakova, maybe something else will clear up in your head," I suggested to him in order to lower me a little from the higher spheres to the sinful earth.

- With Chumakova, everything is simple. It's a shame you don't know about her. She writes about Bulgakov. Even the capital work was released by the Chronicle of the Life of Mikhail Bulgakov. Every self-respecting intellectual has this book. Vasily Lukich opened the door of the Helga secretary and took a thick book from the shelf.

"Look here," he opened the last page and pointed to the place where I read: "The author sincerely thanks everyone who has helped and is helping to restore the biography of Mikhail Bulgakov in different years ..."

"My name should be here, too, but I was advised to forego that honor.

- Why? I interjected again with a naive question.

Lukic, apparently, was captivated by memories, as he answered without any irritation:

"She got in trouble along our lines. American publishers came out on it. They offered to throw material for the publication of Bulgakov's works, but she, without reporting, showed an unhealthy initiative. If everything had happened a little earlier, I would have gotten a fiver in the zone.

I said nothing. And not because silence is a sign of consent, but in order not to provoke the old man to new memories of his work in the field of deciphering manuscripts. And he did the right thing.

"I think," Lukich continued, after drinking his already cold tea, "that the development of the "bibliophile" was approved for the same reason.

From one of the moles who have settled in the library of the American Congress, an encryption came that almost every week the library takes on balance, speaking in our language, a pack of books and manuscripts in Russian. Mole was asked to send in lists of receipts for the last year - and this was, if I am not mistaken, the year of the thirty-eighth. We looked at the list in the management, shrugged our shoulders, but decided to send it to the authorities.

I don't know who added to this list, but suddenly such a noise began in the organs that, according to Borovyachiy, this has not been observed since the leak of information from the Tupolev bureau. The residency was cleaned up, some people were allowed to go to waste, libraries in Moscow, Leningrad, Kyiv, and in other large cities were taken into account. In short, some sources of income for the American library have been discovered.

And then the mole added fuel to the fire. Looks like he got a special job. Catalogs of book auctions went to the authorities in containers, red marks flashed on the pages of the catalogs opposite everything Russian.

— Lukic, you paint a picture of a colossal cultural sabotage.

"Here, that's cultural sabotage. Then the right words were not found to give a command to the press. More and more they got used to the usual ones, but somehow they were no good. You would then receive an order for this couple of words.

"That's right, and the order," I objected languidly.

- And what? Not only the order. Maybe you would be nominated as a candidate for the Supreme Council. And if he were on the lists of the nomenklatura, he could get into the apparatus of the Central Committee. Then everything was serious. And if it's serious, it was done quickly. There were few specialists left who could quickly determine the essence of what was happening.

— Lukic! I almost yelled, "I think you're going too far, which is scary. These words would have occurred to a child if someone had told him your story.

"Of course they would. And they came. Maybe everyone had these words on their tongues, but someone had to say them. Someone should have had the courage to take it and say it LOUD!

- Ah, that's what you're talking about. Fear, then, ice bound the souls of the Chekists!

- And there is fear! The case, you know, is new, unusual. It's not just smuggling! Okay, you listen and shut up. Involved, then, in this case accountants. They calculated the amount for which all Russian printed matter was sold at auctions - they gasped! I don't remember exactly, but it was worth millions of dollars! I remember only a few names and prices: a tiny book "What is tobacco" - a thousand dollars, Dostoevsky's autograph - twenty thousand, a collection of Tyutchev's poems - three thousand ... And a dollar in those days is not a modern "buck" for you.

Lukic grinned, stroking the back pocket of his trousers, and continued:

- Developed a plan. Who developed, you already understood, I will not repeat myself. It's disgusting to use a false name every time. They gave one bibliophile an idea - to come up with a proposal to publish a dictionary of Soviet bibliophiles. Many responded. Book lovers reached out to the initiative group. At first, some kind of riffraff. For example, a turner collected the complete works of the classics of Marxism and revolutionary democrats - he already considered himself a book lover. The main thing is that there should be at least five hundred books. Are you crazy? Under the old decree customized. But real connoisseurs fell for the bait. People have short memories!

Collectors wrote something like bibliophile questionnaires. From them, they fished out information about real collectors, their addresses, collecting experience, the approximate composition of the library, sections, and so on.

Information flowed in a thin stream, the coolest owners, as a rule, were silent, rumors spread that a new expropriation of personal libraries was being prepared ...

"What," I couldn't help it, "has this happened before?"

- Yes, I told you that they were driven under the old decree. Back in 1918, the documents of the Council of People's Commissars on the protection of libraries and the requisition of private book depositories were adopted. All personal libraries, if they had more than five hundred books, were confiscated. You understand that most of the owners turned out to be a counter or sympathized with the counter and went to waste. Books were taken into account, but many were, of course, plundered, destroyed due to ignorance ... What was left ended up in libraries. But not enough. The Civil War has taken its toll...

I remember myself drowning the potbelly stove with books from the collection of Prince Dolgorukov. I look at the fire and rejoice at how the hated mug of the counter-revolutionary writhes and curls up into a tube. Here, I think, there is at least some benefit from you - to warm the young Chekist in the difficult hour of the young Soviet Republic. I burned twenty folders of engravings, each half of this table. No, I burned less. One day Comrade Lunacharsky came in, looked at the engravings and offered to exchange five or six folders for bundles of firewood - by weight. At first I didn't believe it, but the people's commissar, after all. Then he agreed. They brought dry birch logs from half a cube and a note: "I am sending three hundred kilograms of firewood for the urgent needs of the Cheka. With revolutionary greetings. Lunacharsky".

And the bindings, I remember, burned badly. Especially leather, with fasteners. I cut off the clasps and sewed them onto the leather jacket. Force...

"Lukich," I interrupted the lyrical digression of the veteran Chekist, or maybe it's for the best that someone, risking their lives, shipped rare books and manuscripts to the Library of Congress.

Why is this for the best? For the worse. This is our cultural heritage.

- What do you think is better for our cultural heritage - to burn in the fire of bourgeois, in landfills, to disappear in junk bags, or to be preserved in the book depositories of the Library of the American Congress or the National Library of London?

- It's like looking.

- How can you see it?

— And so! Someone stole the national treasure and profited from it. Remember, I once told you about Wolf Holshtok. You don't know how much he stole and smuggled with his brother Meir. When he was taken to Pretoria, he had tons of cultural heritage and kilometers of glued canvases with him - from Raphael to Picasso!

— Lukic! Firstly, I don't remember who Holshtok was, and secondly, even if he stole it and took it to Pretoria, it was not for kindling a potbelly stove.

- Yes, and Meir, when they brought him back, sang the same thing. Requisitioned, he said, from a counter-revolutionary element. Allegedly for the better preservation of objects of material culture from Russian barbarians. If at that time he had not insulted Menzhinsky, had not defended his brother Wolf, who abused his resemblance to Vladimir Ilyich, he would have been left to live and live and make his mind up. Perhaps it would not be necessary to say that Ilyich died in Gorki.

"But you still didn't answer my question, Lukic. What is better anyway?"

- It is best to return the state.

But no one took it from the state. The state took everything from the people by force.

- Again, you need to push the basics of Leninism. The state took by force only what was stolen from the people. Have you forgotten the slogan "expropriation of the expropriated"? This is the main slogan of the Bolsheviks!

- Chief, Lukich, and the only one, unfortunately. And it's very unfortunate that you're still defending him.

- Am I protecting him? Yes, I may not understand it, but I did it in good faith. And I'm trying to explain to you how it really happened. You think I'm proud that I burned prints. Yes, maybe I want to cry when I remember this.

"Imagine, Lukich, that the Bolsheviks return to power. Imagine that they again put forward the slogan "rob the loot." What will you do? Take those who have a large library, torture them until they admit that they are agents of influence?"

- Don't yell! I'm not going to do anything except get myself an increase in my pension. Remember, I once told you about Colonel Zyuganov. Maybe a son will be chosen. First to the presidency, then to the Chairman of the Supreme Council ...

"All right, Vasily Lukich," I interrupted, "you and the current government will soon restore your personal. Tell me about your client, I'm tired, and you won't get through."

"Of course you won't. I have a Chekist hardening. We are all forged from Felix of Iron. Don't beat us."

"Your Felix is gone now, Lukich. He is in the dustbin of history. Like the whole state of emergency, gepeushka,

emvedeshka, enkevedeshka, kagebeshka...

- Your faeskaki and feesbyaki will sooner be in the dustbin of history than my emergency! She will live forever, like her creator. All! Listen.

When the organs got to the bibliophiles of the first category and probed their collections, some people almost felt sick. What riches are hidden from the people, from the state. How many tanks and planes could be built with this money! First of all, they tried to gently persuade the holders to transfer the valuables to the state for storage, and they themselves were offered to be custodians at the collections, as if to work in warehouses - on full support, of course. Useless. Units agreed. And when they began to describe their meetings, it turned out that they, the bitches, managed to take out the most valuable thing and spray it on their friends and acquaintances.

The accounting commission arrives, and on their shelves - some transcripts of the congresses of the CPSU (b) are placed, "Niva" old in packs, collected works of Comrade Lenin, Comrade Marx. One of them found as many as fifty sets of Gorky's complete works. They wanted to sew on him speculations on a particularly large scale, but the experts said that they could not sell more than five altyn rubles for that. It didn't work out! The shops were filled with Gorky. One and a half rubles for that.

Nothing to do. I had to go for provocations. There is such a legitimate technique in operational actions when it comes to the security of the country. Then the public got involved. The press tried. A couple of show trials were staged. Berkov Pavel Naumovich was taken. He helped us involuntarily with his lectures on the theory and practice of collecting.

- Vasily Lukich, to whom did he lecture? Isn't it your smart guy?

- No, Ka ... that is, he personally did not read Borovyachey. He read lectures in the pre-trial detention cell to cellmates. Several specialists in the field of mechanics and precision optics were assigned to him there, in the sharashkas there were not enough opticians and mechanics - specialists in gearboxes for heavy self-propelled guns and in shock-resistant sights for new tanks.

- And what do tanks and self-propelled guns have to do with bibliophilia, Vasily Lukich? Remember, God is with you!

"It turns out they do, if I mention it. But this one: Maksutov, you probably heard about him - the inventor of the reflex telescope and a series of telephoto lenses for reflex cameras - he was terribly fond of lecturing. Well, as they say now, he had such a complex. So he organized a circle of self-education in the cell. Boreyko August Silvestrovich gave lectures to Maksutov and Berkov on theoretical mechanics and the theory of elasticity, Maksutov taught a course in optics and optical instrumentation, and Berkov explained to two technicians the basics of bibliography, the history and theory of bibliophilism in the new conditions of socialist society.

As you might guess, a rather literate "hen" was sitting in the cell, who took notes, or rather, took shorthand and passed it on, bypassing the investigator, to my smart guy.

All this was useful when working with bibliophiles. In short, when the collectors of book rarities, manuscripts, and autographs were pressed down, the stream of cultural heritage turned into a huge collection of printed, handwritten and pictorial products.

When the confiscated was put in order, work began on accounting for the materials obtained in the process of seizure. Before the start of the count, Borovyachiy chose something for himself, and the half-witted guard knocked on Beria's office. Lavrenty Pavlovich became interested in books, sent his people to the storehouse several times, and also ordered a couple of trucks to be loaded. They brought him to the dacha - to Abkhazia. And at the same time, Comrade Stalin reported that



Zhdanov made a mistake with the cadres - they allegedly abuse their official position.

It was not so easy to hold Comrade Stalin on the chaff in those years. He called Comrade Zhdanov in Leningrad and asked what kind of rarities there were accumulated in the cellars of the Big House on Liteiny. I forgot to tell you that all the work with the bibliophiles was conducted by the Leningrad Administration, so the repository was arranged in the basement, preserved from the church that used to be on Voinova Street. Previously, it was called Shpalernaya.

"She's become Tapestry again, Lukich.

- Here you see. The truth is, she always triumphs.

"That's for sure, Vasily Lukich," I confirmed, not understanding what truth the veteran was talking about.

- Comrade Zhdanov sent a list to Moscow, but he also became interested in why the leader sticks his nose into such a petty matter. Now answer me, what kind of corrupting force is sitting in books that such iron people could not resist?

- And what, Zhdanov also took away a couple of wagons of rarities?

- A couple, not a couple, but I used something. Borovyachev sent to the repository with notes on the list. And he, the demon beguiled him, took away something else for himself, not knowing that a complete inventory of the contents of the basement had already been sent to Joseph Vissarionovich. And Comrade Stalin, among other things, noted the notebook that you see in front of you. Most of all in the list of Comrade Stalin were military books. Pictures on biblical themes ordered to pick up everything. The bronze busts of Russian princes and tsars were transported to the Kremlin. Yes, a lot more. But for some reason he was also interested in the Elk Book.

- It is clear why, - after all, you yourself said that both the NKVD and the Central Committee of Bulgakov were supervised by the leader himself. Maybe Stalin did not want his favorite Soviet writer to end up in your paws.

- May be. I really think it's something else entirely. It's a pity that you, in a hurry, a little, instead of reading more in the Elk Book, bombarded me with stupid questions. I thought that later on we would sit together and ponder over some interesting places. I don't have enough knowledge.

In this case," continued Lukich, "there were a few more slips. Of what the first secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee chose for himself, part had to be sent to Comrade Stalin, part to be ceded to Beria. It was then that Lavrenty Pavlovich came to Leningrad to deal with Comrade Zhdanov himself, Borovyachiy even took with him. I think that he gave them a face-to-face confrontation. And he himself was an investigator and a witness.

Comrade Zhdanov escaped with a mild heart attack, he took upon himself the loss of the Elk Book; Borovyachiy disappeared with giblets without an entry in the book of acts; I'm sitting on hot coals, arrogating to myself the right to use someone else's property. True, I still can't figure out whose property it is: either Svetlana Iosifovna, or the missing Pavel Nilovich. Or now look for the old owners.

Vassily Lukich pushed back his glass, brushed the crumbs of biscuits off the tablecloth, and pushed The Elk Book toward him. For a minute he leafed absently through the pages, glancing over the autographs and inserts.

"Lukic," I broke the protracted silence, "I offer you the most beautiful way out of the situation: burn it in the stove and that's it!"

- Yes, I would have done it long ago if I had not been engaged in deciphering texts. Yes, and Borovyachiy is still missing for me. I think that a hundred times each message was examined letter by letter. It seems, wake me up in the middle of the night, name the page - I will recite any one from memory without hesitation. This is where everything sits.

Lukic tapped his skull, sighed heavily, and got up from the table. I got up too.

Saying goodbye, I whispered in his ear: "So Bulgakov was right - manuscripts do not burn."

## INCARNATIONS OF COMRADE STALIN

### 1

Once I saw on the table at Vasily Lukich a brochure with the intriguing title "Indian Yogis. Who are they?" and rather sarcastically asked:

- Vasily Lukich, have you decided to do yoga?

The veteran waved his hand wearily and muttered:

"I already took care of her at the time. I will never forget.

As always, Vasily Lukich knew how to present me with such surprises that I quickly went from a mocking attack to a dead defense, not knowing how to fend off the incredible information of a veteran Chekist. But while I was still advancing.

"Vasily Lukich," I asked mockingly, "do you believe in the immortality of the soul?"

— In incarnation? Lukich asked. "Of course I do. I myself live the first life in the world, and therefore I will live a long time. The first life is the longest. And the last one too. And in the middle - anything happens, but almost always the same.

I realized that I had already missed the first blow, and I had no choice but to swallow my saliva and ask hoarsely:

- So, how is it?

- That's how! Vassily Lukich grinned. — This is a complicated matter. You won't be able to overpower him. But read these pamphlets, don't read them, you won't understand anything anyway. For this is the secret of life.

I tried to go on the counteroffensive.

Did you take yoga at the academy as well?

"We went through a lot at the academy," Lukich replied evasively, "but theory doesn't always fit in with practice. "We did not teach dialectics according to Hegel," as the poet said. And rightly said. It happens in life that you can't stick it into any Marxism-Leninism.

"I don't know," I said, "to get the veteran going a bit, it all sounds so stupid to me." Baby tales. I do not believe in different souls there and all that.

- Do not believe? Lukic spread his hands. So no one can help you. People believe in something or do not believe in the measure of their ignorance in this or that issue. Comrade Stalin, for example, did not even believe in cybernetics and drove the country into the ass.

Did he believe in the transmigration of souls? I asked, still not realizing that I was getting into

"ten".

"You know," Lukich replied, "no one really knows what Comrade Stalin believed or didn't believe in, if he even existed in one person. There were so many contradictions in it that the thought involuntarily crept in that there was not one person, but at least five. And everyone is different. I already told you about the Kuntsevskaya zone, where the doubles were kept. There were three of them. But there were two more. And it is possible that one of them was real. I judge this by some directives that came down to us in MTB. A twin will never rise to such heights. A doubler is always a doubler. He is unable to play the lead role. With your questions about the soul, you just reminded me of a story...

I've become all ears.

"It happened in the early spring of 1949. Comrade Stalin turned seventy in December, and for half a year the whole country rejoiced with happiness and devotion. Events were planned that were to surpass similar festivities in December 1939, when Comrade Stalin was sixty years old.

Then the war with Finland interfered a little with the splendor and scope of all events, and it must be a coincidence that just on the day of Stalin's anniversary, a large group of our troops was captured by the Finns. True, Comrade Stalin was not informed about this and the celebrations were not spoiled much, but all the same, everyone, and, above all, Comrade Stalin himself, was in a rather gloomy mood.

But there was nothing to stop here. Moreover, on the anniversary of Comrade Stalin, scientists presented him with a live atomic bomb that we stole from the Americans, and the great leader could finally breathe easy. And then from the forty-fifth year I could not find a place for myself. He believed that his plan - to seize the whole world - collapsed completely with the advent of atomic weapons. He even scolded Comrade Lenin himself obscenely, almost for the first time after the closure of my special zone, for the fact that the shitty Nepman - that's how he cordially called him - did not foresee such a development of events in the final decay of capitalism. Even then he did not know that the Americans created the atomic bomb with Lenin's money. I don't know what would have happened to him!

Since the time of the Yalta conference, Lavrenty Pavlovich was constantly summoned to his place and yelled: "Do you remember, Lavrenty, what Lenin said about the atom. He is inexhaustible, he understood - inexhaustible. The Americans are getting Pachema from it, and you are only speeding it up? How many accelerators have you riveted? And, Lavrenty, take it, and say that Comrade Lenin was not talking about an atom, but about an electron. Comrade Stalin stamped his feet. It rarely happened to him

But it helped, the work was accelerated. Got the bomb out. True, not yourself, but okay! Having received the bomb, the leader calmed down a little and prepared to celebrate his seventieth birthday with the whole country. I, as you already know well, studied at the academy, and I was called to the authorities only to solve such problems that no one else could solve except me.

I did various "delicate" cases. Why me? Honestly, I'll tell you - not because I was already so smart, but because there were no particular hunters to take on such cases. A lot of people even thought I was stupid. Judge for yourself, if one of them, say, visited Kuntsevo instead of me, and saw the twins of Iosif Vissarionovich, what would happen to them? Mind would be moved - for sure. And if someone had not moved his mind, then he would have died from fear. Since they were trusted to find out, it means that they will be shot - it's like giving drink. All the people were scientists. The entire Lubyanka was full of rumors. Then they told how one of our Stalins was floating in a bathhouse and saw something in him that was not supposed to be known. So he didn't come out of the bath. Died of heart failure.

What about Stalin! One of the Chekists, as a security guard, squirmed for many years, then into people

got out, became a driver, received a nomenklatura position - he drove comrade Andreev. You probably don't know this today. And there was such a small man at the leader. So our guy accidentally scratched his dacha with the back of a car. They immediately took him to the neighboring bushes and shot him.

Therefore, no one wanted to take on cases related to the leaders of the party and government. And I, since they didn't slap me after the Lenin zone, I was no longer afraid of anything. I felt in my gut that they were keeping me alive in order not to appoint another to this place. And to shoot me, as they probably thought, would never be too late.

Here you go. As usual, my direct superiors call me at home and say: "Come, Lukich, to me. The matter is not dusty." And I already understand from his tone that this non-dusty matter weighs heavily on him. So he wants to hang this case on me.

I come to the boss. I see that he is a little out of his mind and with some strange look looks first at me, then at the portrait of Comrade Stalin.

The boss rubbed his whiskey, shook his head and asked:

— Lukich, you drink vodka, don't you?

"I drink," I say, "when they treat me.

"Let's have a drink," the chief sighs, "because you can't figure it out without a half-liter.

We drank a faceted glass, ate cold Lend-Lease stew, which was left over from the war, and then the boss said to me:

"Lukic, do you know anything about the soul?"

- What kind of soul? I ask.

- Well, which, - the boss answers not very confidently, - every person has inside along with organs.

- And ... - I laugh, - are you talking about this soul, Comrade General? I know about her. In the old days, during interrogations, they always said: "Answer me, otherwise I'll let the soul out of you!"

- In-in, - the general was delighted, - I'm talking about this very soul, which is released from the organs during interrogations or when execution of the highest measure.

And pours another glass.

- Of the organs - that's for sure, - I say, - because the organs are us. Punishing sword of the working people.

"Shut up," the general hisses, "I'm not talking about these organs, but about others.

- About what then? I didn't understand. - About party members?

Here we clinked glasses with him and suddenly drank in a row. The general exhaled air and hissed:

- What other party bodies? I'm talking about internal organs!

He gave out something obscene, he shoots with basins on the sides, and his eyes are wet, I see that he is clearly unwell.

- About the Ministry of Internal Affairs? - I try to guess - let them do it themselves. What are we doing here?

"Are you going to play the fool for me for a long time?! - the general became furious, - am I telling you about the Ministry of Internal Affairs? I'm telling you about the internal organs that everyone has. Guts and other shit! Understood?"

"No," I say, "permit me to report, I don't understand. What's with the guts?"

"Let's take the third one," the general suggested, and his voice was hoarse, plucked, you see, from my dullness.

We drank. The general lit a cigarette, calmed down, collapsed in an armchair and asked:

"Have you ever been x-rayed in the medical unit, Lukic?"

"That's right," I answer, "they did. On the combat medical board when entering the academy. They just didn't find anything."

- In-in, - the general cheered up, - it means that you know what is inside you, that is, inside you there is a heart, a liver, a stomach, lungs and something else - you can't remember everything.

"I know," I say, "of course. There is also this one, how is it? Bladder."

- Well done, - the general praised, - these are the very internal organs that I am talking about. Understood?

"Now I understand," I answer, "but I don't understand what it is all about, Comrade General?" Do I need to cut something out of me, or something, for health?

"No," the general grimaced, "you don't need to cut anything. You just need to understand that, in addition to all of the above, you also have a soul. Just don't see her. That's what we're talking about."

- Allow me, comrade general, a question? I ask. "But this is all from the realm of church obscurantism."

"I agree with you," the general nods, "but we, Chekists, exist in order to know well what our enemies breathe. Right?"

"That's right," I answer, "only I have never dealt with these issues. If again some kind of campaign against the priests is planned, then it is better for you to contact the comrades who are in charge of this topic. We have a whole department headed by Comrade Shcherbitsky. They hold these priests!"

"Don't teach me," the general grumbled with displeasure, "if it were about planting another two hundred priests and demolishing two hundred churches, would I tear you away from your studies because of such trifles?" They would have done it themselves. And I called you for this reason. Listen. As they told me in the secretariat of the Central Committee, I will tell you so.

The general pulled out several sheets of paper from the folder, on which the stamps of special secrecy, adopted in the office work of the Presidium of the Central Committee, were blue.

"There is an opinion," the general continued, putting on his glasses, "that every living person has a soul. Where it is located and what it is in general is unknown to science, and the priests also cannot really show anything in essence, even under the influence of the third degree of social protection. That is why it is ordered not to touch this issue, but to take it for granted. Only living people have a soul. If a person dies - regardless of the reasons - whether they shot him, died in the zone on a common fund or from a heart attack, like Comrade Zhdanov, then this

the soul itself flies out of the even body. Do you understand, Lukic?

- Yes sir! - I nod my head, - flies away after the execution, and before the execution goes to heels.

"You are clever, Lukic! - The general was delighted, - it's easy to work with you, for that everyone loves you. So. So, she flies away, but without a body, her soul, that is, very nasty, and she strives to climb into another body. But since there is already a soul in every body, the liberated soul will not be allowed there. Because it is not supposed to have two souls on one body. They are in perfect order here. And here again incomprehensible things begin. Comrade Suslov explained to me for a long time, but he himself, it seems, is poorly versed in this matter. It means that she, this soul, is looking for either an unborn baby in the womb and flies there through the hole you know or waits in the maternity hospital when some baby appears from this very hole. As a baby screams - it means it's ready - the soul is already in it. And if it happens that the soul hesitates, then the baby will go crazy. From this, all infant mortality, it turns out, occurs. It is not for nothing that people say, "Get the soul out of you!" Did you learn that, Lukic?

"Yes," I say, "now I present the scheme.

"Let's go further," the general continues, looking at the secret sheets, "that means, roughly speaking, the following picture turns out: people are dying, and souls are jumping from one body to another. Whether there is any regularity in this process - I don't know, but there is an opinion that the soul will not jump into anyone anyhow. The soul of the soul is also different. For example, a general's soul will never move into the body of some gopnik, but will choose something better for himself. Usyok?

"No," I say, "it's not clear here. If, as you said, Comrade General, she inhabits newly born babies, then how can she know who this baby will later become: a general, a gopnik or an enemy of the people?

"Well, you are stupid, Lukich! exclaims the general. - What is not clear here? If the soul is a general, then she will lead this baby to the generals. They say among the people: "He has the soul of a general." Everything depends on her.

"That is so," I agree, "but if we are talking about the enemies of the people, then it turns out that the soul leads them right under execution." So, is it some kind of pleasure for her to have the body shot?

The general blushed, looked at the leaflets and answered:

"I can't say anything to you, Lukich, on this score. I don't understand myself. So don't ask me too many questions. Because the thing is this: Comrade Stalin ordered to find out who he was in his past ... - the general looked at the sheets and added in syllables, - ...in-kar-nats-yah. In past incarnations. Understood?

"No," I answer honestly, "I don't understand. As you said?

"In-car-nations," the general repeated in syllables, "write it down." This is the keyword. Remember. Then it will be easier to work. Find out what's what, and don't pull. Ordered no later than December 21 to submit.

- Interesting! I'm trying to get away from the task. "Yes, all this is nonsense, Comrade General. Let's write what we found out. In a past life, Comrade Stalin was, say, Comrade Marx, and before that, Comrade Hegel, and before that, Suvorov, and so on through Peter the Great to Ivan the Terrible, or further to Caesar and Alexander the Great ...

"Thought about it," the general admitted, "riskily!" And suddenly this is a test. Maybe they already know everything, but they check us for chernukha? What then? So we slopochem that you will not be happy! Are you kidding me? The task itself is under control, and you propose to limit yourself to unsubscribing. Remember how Pavel Nilovich unsubscribed when they were looking for Gertrude Schmidt. Everything, it would seem, was done with honor, even the burial documents were bungled. Deftly then framed Tuleev Kabanyachiy. Do you remember?

"I remember, of course," I sighed. - Mahu was then given by Kabanyachiy. I believed the questionnaire.

- In-in, - the general confirmed, putting the last piece of stew in his mouth, - he believed the false questionnaire, he believed Tuleev's act, he believed ... No! Gotta do it right!

- How is it supposed to be? I ask. How are these tasks supposed to be done? I have no idea I have.

"Listen here," the general orders, "first go to the library, look at different books." What word can you find for this, what did you write down. Take a moment to understand the problem better. And then find someone who knows how to trace these, as they are, carnations.

- Are there any who can? I'm interested.

The general hesitated.

- They say there is. Look.

- Where can I look for them? - I don't understand - you at least specify who.

- Where to look? - the general shrugs his shoulders, - look for the zones. In the zone now you can find anyone you like. At least I'll cut my ass, even a pig in my pants. Come on, act. You will report to me personally. 2

I went first to our academic library. A retired colonel from our political agencies was in charge of the subscription there.

I handed him a piece of paper with the word "incarnation" and asked if there were any books on this subject. He looked at me over his glasses and asked:

- And why do you need it?

"Actually," I say, "we're not supposed to ask questions. This you must remember. But to you, so be it, I will say: for the dissertation. Nothing more, sorry, I can not say. And if you ask a question, I will write a report that you are interested in questions that do not concern you.

Let them figure out who you work for.

He flashed his glasses at me, took a piece of paper and went to the book depository. But I realized that he would not look for books, but to call and knock. And he wasn't even shy. I hear his voice: "Yes, I understand. Yes, Comrade General. I'm listening!"

After about half an hour, he comes out covered in dust and says:

"We don't have books that begin with such a word. I even looked at the frequency dictionary of words used in the writings of comrades Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mikoyan. And there is no such word. And this means that such a word simply does not exist. There must have been some kind of mistake, Comrade Colonel.

"No," I say, "there should be no mistake here. Everything is correct.

- What does this word actually mean? asks the ticket holder.

"You are not supposed to know," I answer.

"I do," he agrees. Apparently, they explained to him over the phone what was happening.

But that doesn't make it any easier for me. Where to go next?

"Go to Leninka," the ticket holder suggested, "there you will definitely find what you need." Not so long ago, we made a request there, which means "torture with a splinter", which was used in Rus' in pre-Petrine times. So what do you think? We found a detailed description and sent it to us. They have everything there.

I went to Leninka.

I show my ID on the ticket. Some aunt immediately became ill. It turns out that a week ago, their director and head of funds were taken for kowtowing before the West. The commission worked and found three more portraits of foreign writers than Russian and Soviet ones in the halls. And only two portraits of Comrade Stalin against the background of thirty portraits of Comrade Lenin. Lenin, too, was probably considered foreign writer.

"Don't worry, comrades," I reassure the library workers, "I arrived without any authority, as an ordinary reader.

And I shoved them a piece of paper with the word "incarnation"... Two women immediately ran to the general catalogue, their hands were shaking, they were sorting through the cards.

They come back pale, visibly upset.

"Nothing, Comrade Colonel. Everything has been revised. And what does this word mean?

"Well, how can I tell you," I say, "this is about the human soul, which, according to bourgeois religious obscurantists, is immortal.

Here they are all numb. They don't even know what to say. Try to say a word - you will immediately fall under the article. And then the least that threatens - anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda - up to ten years and loss of rights.

- Well, why were you silent? I ask.

Here one, which is more pompous, apparently, says:

— Comrade, all the books on religious topics are kept in our special fund. Go there.

And she took me to a special fund. I had to go down a spiral staircase, as if into a firing cellar. Iron door with peephole, call button. They called. A police officer opens the door with a pistol. He saw me, hand to the visor:

"Good morning, Comrade Colonel. May I know the purpose of your arrival?

"We need one book," I answer, "is there any library people here?"

"That's right," the policeman replies, "there is. I'll report back this second.

Himself - by the handset and reports: "A comrade from the authorities has arrived. Time to get out!"



Then the bells rang, as during a combat alarm in some bunker, and a senior police lieutenant runs towards me, fastening his tunic as he goes.

Runs up, out of breath, and reports:

— Comrade Colonel, no incidents have occurred during my duty at the special storage fund of the Vladimir Ilyich Lenin State Public Library! Duty Senior Lieutenant Melnikov!

“At ease,” I say, “take me to the subscription!”

- I'm listening! he says. — Where are the witnesses?

- Witnesses? I didn't understand. Why do I need witnesses?

- I can not know! the policeman answers. “Only they always came with witnesses from you. But don't worry. I'm organizing everything right now. Let's take Aunt Katya, a cleaner, and Kuzmich, a janitor. We write them down in witnesses. They are not very literate, but they know how to sign. And if you order without witnesses, then we can do without them.

“But they don't let you in here without witnesses?” I'm interested.

“If you act,” Senior Lieutenant Melnikov explains, “it's better with attesting witnesses. According to the law, this is how it is supposed to be: act with witnesses. So that there would be no further talk. What, they say, was not activated, but stolen. But as you say. You order without witnesses - we will activate without witnesses. In extreme cases, you will write me down with the foreman as witnesses. It's something important, state.

And the senior lieutenant told me that for half a year now, officers from the Lubyanka have been coming here about twice a month and “activating” the books. “Activated” means they are withdrawn from the funds, stuffed into sacks, the sacks are sealed and taken to a nearby stoker to be burned. At the same time, they draw up an “Act”, under which they and witnesses sign. Bags are forced to carry policemen. “My back hurts,” Melnikov complained, “the books are heavy as cement.”

“The library staff should have been made to carry,” I suggested, “and not to struggle themselves.

“They tried,” the senior lieutenant sighed, “so you can imagine, Comrade Colonel, they opened the bags in the stoker and began to steal people's property. It is good that the stokers showed vigilance and informed us. We caught them red-handed when they gutted the bag. Who would have thought? The people are all old and intelligent. Some even party members and front-line soldiers. They were issued by decree of August 7th. There are only women left in the library now. The men are all seated. Here it is necessary

carry yourself.

“The soldiers would be caught up,” I said as we walked through the labyrinth of underground corridors.

“Soldiers are not supposed to,” Melnikov replied, not without pride, “this is a regime job. Outsiders should not be allowed in. So a friend from the authorities explained to us.

“He explained it to you correctly,” I agreed. “In our time, vigilance is the foundation of statehood.

The basement, it must be said, was twice as large as in the Lubyanka. Steep were iron doors closed with large barn locks. There were signs on the doors saying “Fund No. So-and-so” with three-digit numbers. At last we entered a windowless room where we hung

two portraits of Comrade Stalin at once (in the uniform of a generalissimo over a map of the Turkmen Canal and in a jacket with a turn-down collar and with some Uzbek girl in her arms, whose parents he ordered to be shot). In addition, there was also a portrait of Pushkin and a poster with a quote from Gorky that he owes everything good in himself to the book. If there was anything good in Gorky, it was the ability to knock like no one else ... Apparently, the more you read, the better you knock.

I went to the barrier, where there was a skinny box with reader cards, and turned to a sad old woman sitting on a subscription, who had an army green padded jacket draped over her shoulders. The room was cold and damp.

The old woman read the word "incarnation" and, without saying a word, pressed the bell button embedded in the subscription barrier.

About five minutes later, a middle-aged lady with powerful forms and strict gray eyes came out of the door behind the old woman.

"The comrade is interested," the old woman said, handing her a piece of paper with the word "incarnation".

The lady looked at the paper, and then at me:

- Are you interested?

"Yes," I confirmed, "I'm interested."

— Your attitude, comrade! demanded the lady in a voice that allowed no objections.

- Relation to whom? I didn't understand.

- I ask you for an official paper that would allow you access to the closed literature of special storage, - the lady said in a chased voice, - such a paper is called a "relationship".

- It's enough? I asked, showing my ID.

Actually, I was in uniform, but for some reason my shoulder straps did not have any effect on the formidable lady.  
impression.

She carefully read the certificate and said, "It says here that you have the right to bear arms. But nothing is said here that you have access to the closed literature of special storage."

"But it says," I said softly, "that everyone, including you, should render me maximum assistance without asking unnecessary questions."

— Is that how? the lady exploded. But the order is common to all. However," she hesitated, "I will find out now."

And she disappeared into the very door from which she appeared.

I began to lose patience and already wanted to call Senior Lieutenant Melnikov to arrange for this zealous librarian to be detained for 72 hours on duty.

"Be careful with her," an old woman in an army padded jacket warned me, "her husband works in the organs." General.

I wanted to figure out what kind of general we were talking about, but we had such a darkness in Lubyanka that I didn't succeed.

Meanwhile the lady reappeared at the door and said in a formal voice:

- Come with me.

We walked along a semi-dark corridor and stopped at the door with a sign: "Ya.A. Vyshinsky, head of the special fund."

"Wow," I thought, "not only is she the wife of our general, she is also the daughter of Vyshinsky. Or maybe his wife?"

We entered a vast office crammed with bookcases, behind the glass of which the spines of the collected works of the classics of Marxism of all editions and in all languages were turning red and blue. Why they were stuffed into a special fund, I did not understand.

"Sit down, comrade colonel," the lady suggested dryly, pointing to a chair opposite her table, and she sat down at the table, on which, apart from a state-owned table lamp with a green shade, there was absolutely nothing, except for my piece of paper with the mysterious word "incarnation" .

"Yanuarina Andreevna, head of the special fund," the lady introduced herself. - So. Which fund do you want to inspect for activation?

"I'm not authorized to activate anything," I admitted.

"Then what do you want from us?" the lady asked in bewilderment and, waving my paper in the air, added: "What does it all mean anyway?"

"I want to get acquainted with the literature that uses this term "incarnation," I said, feeling that I was losing my patience again, although I remember whose daughter was sitting in front of me. I mean, I'm in front of her.

- Do you want to get acquainted with the subject of activation of such literature? Yanuarina Andreevna continued to insist.

- I want to get acquainted with the subject of self-education, - I admitted, - with a view to raising the level of this very education.

"Interesting," the lady sang, "and that's all?"

I looked at the portraits of Stalin, Molotov and Vyshinsky hanging over her head, sighed and said:

"You know, Citizen Vyshinsky, that I have the right to arrest anyone who simply does not help me, much less obstructs my work. Do you really think that I would have climbed into your rat holes at all if I had not had a specific task from my leadership.

- Rat holes! squealed the lady. — How dare you! You know that you are sitting in an office that Comrade Stalin himself has visited! Why are you breathing the air that the great leader breathed while fleeing from agents of the tsarist secret police and from German bombs? Do you know this? I will immediately report your behavior to the right place!

She grabbed the telephone receiver, feverishly dialed the number and, in a voice breaking with indignation, began to quickly say: "Dad, some cosmopolitan came to me with

Lubyanka, who sits in my office and insults Comrade Stalin. What? What's his name? I don't know what his name is..."

- What is your name? she turned to me.

"My name is Vasily Lukich," I replied, knowing full well that my name would make the right impression on her father. Surely, he did not forget our meeting in 1922, when, under certain circumstances, he had to chew the muzzle of my revolver for about five minutes, kneeling before Ilyich. And so it happened, because, rounding her eyes, she nervously hung up, but she couldn't overpower herself, flashed her eyes in my direction and exhaled:

"Actually, it's a form of disgrace!

- Sorry? - as if I did not understand.

What did you write to me? the lady exclaimed indignantly, pointing her finger, ugly manicured, at my unfortunate note. - What did you write to me here, I ask you ?!

I was silent, deciding whether to call the convoy or wait a little longer.

- Firstly, - Yanuaria Andreevna continued to rage, - not "incarnation", but "reincarnation". And secondly, who gave you the right to use this foreign word when there is a Russian word "reincarnation". Don't you know the latest instructions of the Central Committee of our Party, prohibiting the use of foreign words in printed publications and in everyday life?!

I didn't know about instructions, to be honest. But, being a football fan of Dynamo Moscow, I noticed that even the usual words disappeared from Vadim Sinyavsky's reports. Instead of the soul-warming words "football match", he began to say "football match", instead of "barbell" the stupid word "rack" appeared, immediately reminiscent of the parade ground of the inner prison, "corner" became "corner kick".

Basically, I had nothing against it. Of course, it is necessary to clean the Russian language. And now they are completely stunned. Even on TV, idiocy constantly flashes, like "killers", "dealers" and "exclusive distributors"!

But then the case was special, and I did not want to explain myself to Yanuaria Andreevna at all. As the general wrote down for me, so I used this word. If it means "reincarnation," then so be it. Break something what?

"You know," I say, "I know your papa well. I remember they took it right on the street and ...

She probably knew this story well even without me, because she picked up another phone and ordered:

- Ivan Nikiforovich, go to the 370th fund. Grab acts on form 8.

"I'll give you the book," she told me as we walked along the half-dark corridor past the steel doors, "but you can use it only in our reading room.

Finally we came to the door, on which hung the sign "Fund No. 270". Two elderly men were waiting for us there. One of them was the head of the First Division. His name was Ivan Nikiforovich Kozlov. The second was a plumber, who had no name. Cursing in an undertone, the nameless plumber fiddled with the heavy barn lock. The rusted castle did not give in. Apparently it hasn't been used since the last one was in book jail.

pamphlet containing the counter-revolutionary word "soul".

Maybe an autogenous one? the plumber asked.

- Come on, let's open it! - the head of the First Department boomed heavily, - otherwise I'll give you an autogenous one!

Finally, the plumber guessed to swear, and the lock opened. With difficulty, he pulled it out of the three-centimeter shackle and took aside a large, finger-thick, rusty door lining.

Yanuarina Andreevna pulled out a bunch of huge old-fashioned keys, which only prison guards have, and deftly, well, directly, masterfully, opened the internal lock.

The iron door slowly opened, and the creak of it turned out the guts. We smelled damp and musty, like from a crypt. All this reminded me of the cells of the underground prison for special purposes, which was located under the cellars of the Lubyanka from the time of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to the present day. Therefore, stepping inside, I prepared to see an exhausted convict lying on a narrow iron bed, and was somewhat surprised to find shelves with books in the cell. They seemed to start up when a light suddenly turned on in their windowless cell. Most of the books were in poor condition.

— You need to activate half to hell! - the head of the First Division growled, looking around.

I was ready to swear that he served in the NKVD as a "broom". This was the name given to special teams that were engaged in the mass liquidation of prisoners in prisons due to an acute shortage of premises.

While I was looking around, Yanuarina Andreyevna, who, to her credit, had an excellent grasp of the funds entrusted to her, went up to a shelf and took out a book. Not even a book, but a pamphlet—no bigger than Stalin's well-known pamphlet *On the Shortcomings of Party Work and Measures to Eliminate Trotskyists and Other Double Dealers*.

The pamphlet was called "Theosophy and the Mysteries of Life" by an Annie Besant. What "theosophy" was, of course, I didn't know, but nevertheless I reached out to take a book whose cover was decorated with a round badge with an inverted swastika and full of black and purple stamps.

"Wait a minute," Yanu Aria Andreevna stopped me, "it is necessary to arrange everything as supposed to.

She went to a small table, took a form from Ivan Nikiforovich and began to fill it out. Then she signed herself, gave Ivan Nikiforovich to sign, and handed it to me to sign.

"Sign here," she ordered, "and put your ID number.

I read the form:

"We, the undersigned, represented by the head of the special fund Comrade Vyshinsky Ya.A. and the head of the 1st department of the V.I. LENIN State Public Library Comrade Kozlov I.N. drew up this Act in that, at the request of Colonel MTB Comrade ... he was given a book for review.

Author: ANNY BEZANT, title: "Theosophy and the mysteries of life", place and year of publication: Kaluga, 1913, inventory number: SF-3778956-z/LN.

The reader is familiar with the rules for using the books of the special fund of the library.

Signatures of the persons who drew up this Act.

Reader's signature.

Library card number.

Date of issue of the book (year, month, day, time of receipt and delivery of the book).

Although I had yet to familiarize myself with the rules for using the books of the special fund, I signed up and we left the vault.

The head of the First Department and the plumber engaged in the procedure for closing the door, while Comrade Vyshinsky and I walked along the corridors and stopped at the door marked "Reading Room". This door only differed from the doors of the fund in that it was not locked with a barn lock and was equipped with a bell. Yanuaria Andreevna called. The door opened, and we found ourselves in a tiny dressing room, where a strict blonde with an unmemorable face was sitting in an army padded jacket.

"Vera Ivanovna," said Vyshinsky, "this comrade from the organs will work with this very book." Register.

The blonde pulled out a registration journal from the table, where she copied the title of the book and the number of the act, a copy of which Yanuaria Andreevna brought with her.

What pages or paragraphs does a friend have the right to read? Vera Ivanovna asked, taking out of the desk drawer copper plates with slits resembling tombstones.

With these plates, the mota book can be blocked on a specific page and even a paragraph, if necessary.

"I would like to read the whole book," I said, surprised myself that there was a note of pleading in my voice.

Vera Ivanovna looked inquiringly at Yanuaria Andreevna. She barely nodded her head. Vera Ivanovna hid the copper plates in a drawer, closed it, and handing me the book, said:

- You do not have the right to make any extracts from the book except in a special workbook, sealed with the wax seal of the institution that sent you. You must then hand over this notebook to me and we will send it to your special department by courier mail. And she opened the door to the reading room.

Generally speaking, this room could be called a hall only with a big stretch. It was a room no larger than twelve square meters in which, if my memory serves me, there were only three office tables with table lamps. On the walls hung portraits of Lunacharsky and Krupskaya, who, apparently, were considered the founders of special funds in libraries. On the fourth wall hung a poster on which a young worker put her finger to her lips and called for vigilance.

At one of the tables sat Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov, whom I knew, from the 4th Directorate of the MGB. In front of him on the table lay a huge folio bound in red morocco, adorned with a golden double-headed eagle. The words "List of the ranks of the Highest Court and His Majesty's Own Chancellery" were imprinted in gold. A little lower was the year 1913. To the right of Zyuganov lay the Moscow telephone directory for the previous year.

The lieutenant colonel noted the surname in the "List of ranks of the Highest Court", then checked it with the telephone directory and wrote it down in a secret notebook.

- Hello, Lukic! he rejoiced at me. Are you writing a dissertation?

"I am writing," I lied, "and what are you doing?" Are you preparing a monograph?

— Monograph! Said too! he whined. "I'm lost here, Lukich. The dampness is such that all the joints ache. And the work is endless! It was ordered to clean the capital of socially dangerous elements by the seventieth birthday of Comrade Stalin. The authorities ordered to check who was spinning around the king and escaped legal retribution. If there is someone on this list that matches the name in the telephone directory, we will take it.

Look, Count Frederiks is the Minister of the Imperial Court, and there are seven Frederiks and sixteen Frederiks in the telephone directory. We will work with everyone.

Or here: here is Count Aldenberg, and in the reference book - Aldenberg Solomon Abramovich. The Jews, then, were also for the king? It is ordered to pay attention to this.

- It's interesting, - I agreed, - work hard. Just keep in mind that not everyone is covered by phones. It would be desirable to involve the municipal service in this case.

— What are you, Lukich, are you kidding me or what?

- I'm not kidding, but I'm talking to you. There are a lot of idlers out there. You are here, one might say, ruining your health, and they have tea there, go out on the hump of the janitors. And from the janitor, you yourself know what an informant turns out to be.

— Lukich, I understand you. Don't talk anywhere! Deal?

- All right, all right, get on with it. And I'm reading a book about how the priests confuse the working people with fairy tales.

Sitting down at the table, I opened Theosophy and the Mysteries of Life by Annie Besant. 3

As you might expect, I learned little from watching Annie Besant's lectures on Theosophy. Nonsense. And besides, Annie herself was confused in these matters no less than my boss, who gave me the task.

The same soul for millions of years, if not more, moves from one human body to another, giving this body a spiritual and divine essence. Otherwise, people would differ from animals only in increased aggressiveness and cunning. However, even in the presence of a soul, people do not suffer at all from a lack of these qualities. Annie Besant noted that the character of the soul is actually the character of a person. Otherwise, a person would be guided by instincts alone. The soul leads him through life, but not always to a happy end. Because the soul is often burdened by the body in which it is located, since it does not always get there by its own will, but more often by prescription. Who writes these instructions, Besant did not know. Or maybe she knew, but she spoke about it very slurredly.

Being weighed down by their body, souls constantly strive to free themselves and every minute make attempts to ruin their body. But even this does not always work out for them, because someone exercises very strict supervision over the souls and does not allow them to be self-willed. In other words, the bodies for many souls are high-security zones, and they, that is, the souls, if they think about anything at all, it is only about rescheduling or about escaping. So all sorts of wars, cataclysms and catastrophes with millions of victims are a kind of mass escape from the zone.

I read and read, and it seemed to me that the so-called "subtle world", where these souls live and from where they are sent to our sinful bodies, is built according to the principles of military communism, where the inhabitants (that is, the souls) who have just drawn one term in the zone (that is, in the body), they immediately "award" another term, sending them to a new zone. That's how it works.

So, I thought, if that world differs from ours in some way, then only by the fact that an individual zone was built in that world for each of its inhabitants. And we catch them all here and shove them into common areas. This means that the same laws of revolutionary expediency operate in the other world as well as in this world. Perhaps there the expediency is much more revolutionary than here. How many rows of fences and barbed wire must be overcome in order to get to the soul! How it is cunningly hidden in its loneliness: the physical body is zone number one; inside it - the astral body - zone number two; the mental body is like a BUR[1] inside the mental zone. But that is not all!

I fought for a long time to understand the "immortal bodies" of a person, one phrase pestered me, I remembered it for the rest of my life: "When the Monad descends into matter in order to spiritualize it, it appropriates an atom from the three higher worlds to itself in order to lay the core of its three higher bodies - atomic, buddhic and intellectual.

I understood this in such a way that theft in the world is indestructible, even if the souls sentenced to a new term - and they take with them an atom of something from the higher worlds to the new zone!

These three higher bodies are, as it were, a lid in a storm, a punishment cell in a lid, and a cage in the punishment cell, into which the soul is shoved and, I think, chained!

At that time, I remember, even a seditious thought flashed through my mind: when Vladimir Ilyich spoke about degenerates, he meant that these same degenerates, as it were, let their souls out of the zone, and lured other souls; or, for example, their souls escaped and instead of themselves someone else's soul was stuffed to serve a term.

It turns out like reincarnation with living bodies. But all this was somehow cloudy mixed up in my head, well, as if Leningrad vodka was washed down with three sevens [2]. Heaviness in the head and pulls into the bushes ...

However, business is business. Reflecting on this subject further, I remembered that although the Soviet Union is one sixth of the land, there are still five sixths where the bourgeois-fascist regime is rampant. Let's say in the USA. There warmongers constantly threaten to burn the whole world in atomic fire.

I always wondered a little: well, why would they, one wonders, destroy the whole world with atomic weapons? What - are they psychos already completely? And now I understand that it does not depend on some Truman or, say, on Comrade Stalin for us. It's just that the souls strive to escape from the bodies and arrange all sorts of outrages all over the planet in the form of wars and epidemics.

All this, of course, was not in Annie Besant's lectures. Before that, as they say, I did it myself. And Besant learned from Annie that there are special people called "Guides", and sometimes "Inductors" or "Initiates", who are able to trace the entire path of any soul from its appearance on Earth to the present day inclusive. I needed to get such a little man in order to complete the assignment. But it is clear that it is necessary to look for it not in the library, but where - I myself did not know yet. I really didn't want to rummage through the zones, as the general suggested to me.

I handed over the book. Vera Ivanovna leafed through it carefully to see if I had torn out a page and let me out of the reading room.



At the exit, Yanuaria Andreevna met me again. I don't know who she called while I was studying the book, but this time she appeared before me as the embodiment of courtesy.

"Excuse us, Comrade Colonel," she sang, "our rules are strict and the same for everyone, because our books, as you yourself understand, are worse than plague bacilli in ideological terms. Weaken our control, and they can cause a terrible epidemic. Therefore, we are ruining our health in these dungeons in order to ensure the happiness of our people for many years in the light of the great plans of Comrade Stalin.

"Why," I thought, "she speaks correctly. These funds should be secured with a second lock and a sentry should be posted at each door. If such books spread across the country, then extinguish the lamp. What will happen to people if they find out that after death they will go from one zone to another zone, where the soldering is, maybe even less?

"You did everything right, Comrade Vyshinsky," I say, "so I will report on command. You are the same as the border guards, and the border, as is well known, must be locked up. Do you read these books yourself? A? Okay, okay, joking. Thank you for your assistance!

Yanuaria Andreevna accompanied me to the very exit, where the policemen were standing, and in parting unexpectedly said: - If you, Comrade Colonel, are engaged in such matters, then you should not have come to us, but to the Institute of Oriental Studies. They are doing these superstitions there.

"Ah, for sure, I think all this nonsense comes to us from Asia. I need to go to the institute. There, perhaps, I will find a guide."

I did not know then that the ex-husband of Yanuaria Andreevna worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies, and she sent me there not at all to help me, but in the hope that I would imprison everyone in this institute.

I left the library, got into my state-owned Pobeda and said to the driver-sergeant: - Drive me to the Institute of Oriental Studies.

And I go straight to the 1st department. And in the library it was necessary to start from the 1st department, but I wanted not to attract too much attention, look at the book and leave. And how it happened.

The head of the 1st department of the Institute of Oriental Studies understood everything perfectly. In the past, he was a major - the commander of the NKVD detachment, consisting of only Kazakhs. I learned their language, learned their habits, and therefore, after leaving for the reserve, he was appointed to the 1st department of the Institute of Oriental Studies. His name was Pavel Ivanovich, and he knew his business well. He listened to me attentively, nodded his head and said:

- There were, there were people here who spent people's money on such fairy tales. But they were all transplanted before the war. Now we work only on the topics of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, and Comrade Poskrebyshhev personally oversees us. So, Comrade Colonel, we can't help you.

— How so? I disagree. "Is there really not a single literate person here who could answer just a few questions for me?"

- What kind of person do you need, Comrade Colonel? asks Pavel Ivanovich. - I don't understand something.

- A literate person is needed, - I answer, - so that he knows the history of the East, their customs and all that. Is there no one left?

"There is one," Pavel Ivanovich admitted, "a Jew. Grigory Izrailevich Grigorovich. He knows six of their languages, but indicated only three in the questionnaire. Takes all sorts of books in scientific

library and reading.

— What kind of books? I got worried.

- And the jester knows them! - the head of the 1st department shrugged his hands. - They are all in Arabic, in Hindi and you won't understand at all. Something there according to their philosophy. He is the only one who reads them.

How did you get these books? I'm interested.

"There are still left from tsarist times," Pavel Ivanovich sighs, "the commissions came a couple of times, but waved their hand. No one could even read the title. And Grigorovich himself gave explanations. So we decided not to do it.

You say he knows six languages? I ask.

"Maybe more," Pavel Ivanovich answers, "but six for sure. My activists told me.

- And free? I wonder.

Pavel Ivanovich blushed.

"I signaled several times," he reported, "but no result. Perhaps the hand is somewhere, and perhaps because he is disabled.

- Disabled person? I asked.

"I lost my leg," explained the head of the 1st department.

- At the front? I asked.

- No. On the expedition, even before the war... That's why I didn't get to the front," Pavel Ivanovich clarified, "and the rest of the wise men who played the fool here and who weren't imprisoned before the war all died in the people's militia. This I know for sure. He himself stood behind them with his "dzhambuls" [3] and showed them with machine-gun fire in which direction they should run.

And Pavel Ivanovich laughed merrily.

But I wasn't laughing.

"I want to talk to him," I said, "send him to me, Pavel Ivanovich. And take a walk somewhere for an hour or two.

- I obey, - he answers, - there is a direct telephone. On it you can immediately "funnel" call.

Pavel Ivanovich left, and fifteen minutes later this same Grigory Izrailevich enters the office. Thin, bald, with gray hair, leans on a stick.

"Hello," I say, "Grigory Izrailevich. Sit down please. Need to talk.

I always use the words "sit down" and not "sit down". And it turns out to be painfully ominous. Once he said "sit down, please", so the prophylactic almost had a seizure.

"I hear you, Comrade Colonel," says Grigory Izrailevich, "what can I do for you?"

I start from afar:

- Do you know six languages?

"That's an exaggeration," he replies, "I really only know three: Arabic, Hindi and Farsi.

Where did you get to study them? I wonder.

"At the university," he smiles, "at the Oriental Faculty, which he graduated in 1934. And then in the process of work improved.

- And little books, - I say, - do you read different books there, what are left from the tsarist regime in the library?

"I read," he answers, "only the literature necessary for work on a topic that is officially approved by the Central Committee.

- And what is the topic? I'm curious.

- The history of the revolutionary workers' movement in the highlands of Tibet, the Himalayas and the Pamirs. The role of the Leninist party in this movement," he says in a dull voice.

"Interesting," I wonder, "and you don't do anything else?"

"Nothing else," he assures, "but on this topic I have already published 17 monographs. I can present to you immediately, if necessary.

"No need," I refuse, "but you didn't study the religions of the East?"

- No, - answers Grigory Izrailevich, - only the labor movement.

"And you don't know anything about the religions of the East?" I smile incredulously.

"Only within the framework of a university course," Grigory Izrailevich persists, "then I didn't have to deal with.

"Well, do you know anything about the transmigration of souls?" - I'm not far behind.

"I know that such a superstition exists," he answers, "but I personally  
I have no relation.

"I believe you," I reassure him, "if I didn't believe it, then we would have talked in another place." I just want to consult with you. If souls migrate, then is it possible to trace these resettlements?

"I have no idea," he shrugs, "I've never been interested in such questions.

I decided to pick it up here from the other end.

- Does the word "guide" mean anything to you?

"Of course," he answers, "this is a railway worker who checks tickets, delivers tea to passengers and is responsible for order in the car.

- But only? I look straight at him.

"Perhaps he has other duties," Grigory Izrailevich averts his eyes, "but they are unknown to me.

- Well, - I say, - do you know such a term as "inductor"?

- I'm afraid to make a mistake, - he answers, - but it seems to me that this term is from the field of electrical engineering. I'm not good at it.

"So," I do not give up, "what does the term "initiate" mean?

- This is the one who has access to regime work, - says Grigory Izrailevich. "I never had a permit myself.

"It seems to me," I summarize, "that you are not telling the truth and do not want to assist the authorities in conducting an investigation of national importance. You, apparently, want to be interrogated in accordance with all the rules in our Lubyanka? So I can arrange it in no time.

He was silent, nervously tapping his cane on the floor.

"I don't hear an answer," I said menacingly.

- Plant, - Georgy Izrailevich unexpectedly shrieked. "You want to learn how to trace incarnations so that you get another reason to send people to camps depending on who his soul was in in the past. You nationality and social origin is not enough.

Here I choked. Indeed, as soon as they begin to figure out where and with whom the soul used to be, you will not be happy. They will put such a "guide" on a commission or simply in the top three - and he will rivet everyone! A person, let's say, is a hereditary proletarian, but then it turns out that in his past life he was a landowner, a capitalist or a kulak. You won't get into trouble! I don't even know anything about my soul. Where was she before? Maybe in what kind of royal gendarme did she sit? Otherwise, where do I get such a craving for Chekist work? What about others? A new reason will put all organs under the knife.

It was then that it began to dawn on me that not everything is so simple in the task that I received.

"All right," I say to Grigory Izrailevich, "no need for tantrums. If you don't want to talk, don't. Everything we do is on a voluntary basis. Sign this non-disclosure paper and you're good to go.

I didn't even say a sacramental phrase in parting to him that, they say, you will need it - so we will call you. I didn't want to meet him again. He scared me, I confess. My whole task began to look in some new light. Nothing ever comes out of the Kremlin just like that. They don't do stupid things there.

But Grigory Izrailevich was taken away after a week. To be honest, I didn't put my hands on it. Then I found out that he was imprisoned according to the list compiled by Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov, whom I met in the special fund of the Lenin Library. Zyuganov unearthed there that there was some kind of Grigorovich in the royal retinue, it seems, an admiral, almost a minister. Then they gave him a little - only 15 years. After Stalin's death, he almost immediately came out and for some reason took offense at me. I even had to prove in the district committee that I had nothing to do with this, otherwise in those days, under the hot hand of Nikita Sergeevich, it was possible to get a job for the fact that I had put a world-famous scientist in the zone. But we figured it out, realized that it was none of my business.

I don't know what Grigory Izrailevich discovered so outstanding in the Pamirs or in the Himalayas,

but hardly in the labor movement. They called, rather, Zyuganov, although I'm not sure. I only know that later he worked in the apparatus of the Central Committee. So, he turned away too. Or covered. 4

No matter how right Grigory Izrailevich was, this did not make me feel better. I had to complete the assignment I received. I realized that there is nothing for me to be smart and go to different institutes. The chief told me correctly: "Look in the zone." And the bosses always know what they're talking about. And if you start to be smart, you will only lose time and you will let yourself and your boss under the monastery.

To tell the truth, I did not want to travel around the zones at all.

What happened in the zones that year, no one is able to imagine now. There was already something not earthly, but rather cosmic, if I may say so in relation to the Gulag.

Solzhenitsyn used to say "the Gulag archipelago", but it was no longer an archipelago, but an entire empire, practically completely independent of the country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. What is there! This empire was with the country of the USSR in a state resembling a state of war and was ready to annex and absorb it. Well, as it is now: the criminal empire has already besieged and is preparing to storm the Kremlin, and the Duma, and the Prosecutor's Office, not to mention banks, trade and other trifles.

It can be said that the USSR was between the Gulag hammer and the imperialist anvil. And he pushed with all his might. But not everyone understood it then.

The Gulag itself had its own problems. All zones were overcrowded, and trains with a new contingent of prisoners were in a continuous stream. There was nowhere to house the prisoners, not to mention to feed and equip them.

There was a secret agreement between the commandants of the zones and the escort service - prisoners were not to be brought alive to the zones. It was easy to do this. 80 prisoners were herded into a calf barn and taken to the Far East, the Far North or Central Asia. They drove for more than a month, but they didn't feed or drink, and if it was winter, they didn't heat the cars. And exactly all the dead were brought to their destination. And the local convicts, who had been imprisoned since the war and pre-war times, were no longer engaged in any construction of the national economy, and they buried newcomers in three shifts.

Maybe you have seen the chronicle of how the frozen corpses are torn apart with crowbars and unloaded from the "calf shed". It's just about those times.

If before the war there was still some purpose in this - to provide a solid rear before the great campaign, then after the war, when it became clear that the great campaign had failed, no one saw any sense in all this. Everything continued as if by inertia. Nobody controlled the country. The leaders were in some kind of prostration. Chaos grew. And, of course, no records were kept in the zones according to any indicators, but only chernukha flourished.

That's why I didn't want to travel around the zones and look for this very "guide" there. But there was no other choice.

Overpowering myself, I went to the Camps Administration, thinking about how to accurately report to the authorities that I did not find anyone either in the zones or outside them.

But even here I did not succeed. Having barely listened to my confused request, General Tyulkin, who was in charge of the entire operational part of the Gulag on an all-Union scale, laughed and said:

- Yes, we have such, Lukich, as many as you like! All zones, consider them clogged. They are called among themselves "ticklers". Well, I'll tell you - there are aces! Download!

That was a different conversation, not like in a library or at an institute. Without any there different complexes and going off scale in different directions. Home environment!

- Do you believe it? Lukic. General Tyulkin continued. - some of them talked so much that in the last year alone, six of my "godfathers" in different zones went crazy, and two hanged themselves. True, those moral principles were severely suppressed by alcohol. "convict" is lying there, dead as a log. He calls a doctor or paramedic there, whoever is, draw up an act that he has definitely died. They activate it in a similar way and, as expected, pull it out of the watch in anticipation of burial or transport. But it turns out that this fagot is the soul of he let himself go, she flies somewhere, and he seems to be lying like a dead man. As soon as you pull him out of the watch - your soul clap in an instant! - and again in him. And together on the run! Can you imagine?

And General Tyulkin laughed evilly.

"But we, too, weren't made with a finger," he said, "they immediately sent instructions to all zones: if a "prisoner" is activated, then his head should be smashed with a sledgehammer or pierced with a bayonet before being taken out of the watch. The number of hunters has gone down!

Why are they called "ticklers"? I asked.

"They used to be tickled," the general explained, "to find out if he really died or not. In some zones, they are called "jumps" - jump-jump and in the wild! He lies himself, but what about the soul? That's why she is the soul. You cannot hold it with thorns, towers and dogs. These are the brother, Lukich, things. And why the hell do you need a jumping tickler?

"I'm doing one thing, small, but tricky," I confessed, "that's exactly what I need to get an ace among aces.

- Asa, you say, - Tyulkin asked again and went to a large map of the Gulag, which hung on the wall. In principle, it was an ordinary map of the Soviet Union, where the territory of our state was painted in the traditional red color, and the Gulag zones were drawn on it in blue. The map wasn't even secret. On it was a "children's" signature stamp "For official use".

It is a pity that Solzhenitsyn did not see such a map. She would impress him. The red paint on the map was already showing through like a small rash against a blue background. And next to it hung another map with the inscription: "The map of the prospective development of the Gulag institutions in the coming five-year plan", on which Moscow alone shone in red, like a small island in the endless blue ocean!

It means that General Tyulkin approached the map, looked at it like a commander considering the plan of the last crushing blow against the enemy, and said:

"I wouldn't tell another, but I'll tell you, Lukich, out of old friendship. There is one convict in Dallag. Pulling a quarter like a Japanese spy. They took him in Manchuria in the forty-fifth year. Well, I'll tell you, he does such things with his soul that you are amazed. They wanted to bring him under the "tower" out of harm's way, but then they thought that with such talents they could try him at work abroad. Imagine, the body is in the zone in the punishment cell on the cement floor, and the soul is somewhere in Washington, roaming around and sniffing out all their secrets! Therefore, I ordered him to be temporarily released from the common fund, attached to the medical unit, and now I am coordinating with the command on the subject of a scientific experiment.

- Well, what does the management say about this? I asked.

Tyulkin's voice sounded undisguised resentment:

"You see, Lukich, I have the impression that our leadership is now all up to scratch. They do not respond to any innovative proposals. They were silent for a long time, and then my paper was sent with a resolution - for now, work on your own. What are our own strengths? There is no Sharag to deal with such topics. True, there is one professor in the zone. Shakes 25 years for parapsychology. I told him: "Here is the material for experiments. Take it, study it." And he is in no way. Afraid of a second term. He is 72 years old, sits a quarter, so he is afraid of the second term! What happens to people? Do you understand something, Lukic? And about sending the soul across the cordon, too, not everything is clear. You can just release the soul or you need to apply for a visa for it. And again, all of a sudden she will hand over all of us beyond the cordon. Then you won't get away from the tower yourself.

- That's for sure, - I agree, - here you have to work very carefully. Step to the right, step to the left - you understand yourself ... Therefore, pass this ace to me, to deal with all these issues. It is possible that it was your way everything turned out. I'll work with this "ace", and then we'll see.

General Tyulkin thought a little and said:

- OK. We'll give it to you. But, you, Lukich, if everything works out as it should, don't forget about us. Indicate in the report whose idea it was. And then you work, you work, and others get orders.

- Do not hesitate, - I answer, - I will not indicate myself, I will mark you and whom you say - I will mark everyone and present them to government awards and early assignments. Because I have been entrusted with a government task of particular importance. Details, you understand, I have no right to give any.

"I understand, I understand," Tyulkin nods his head, "since you have been entrusted, it means a state secret for "three zeros". It's clear. I'll give you, Lukic, this convict. Only you will have to go to Dallag yourself. I know the chief there, Colonel Lukyanov, well. He will never give it to the stage. Yes, and the stages now do not bring anyone from there to Moscow. Twenty kilometers away, and all of them, like flies, die from heart failure. And nothing to be done - everything is framed as it should, all the certificates are in order. And no one knows what actually happened: either everyone was shot, or everyone fled. Or bought off. So go yourself.

Well, I was so reluctant to go to the Far East that I asked:

- Listen, Tyulkin, do you have any "ace" closer? Near Moscow, shall we say?

- No, - he answered, - there are only urks near Moscow. How socially close.

He handed me a sealed envelope addressed to Colonel Lukyanov and wished me a happy journey.

I called my general and reported how things were going.

- What to do, - the general seemed to sympathize, - we must go, Lukich. I will knock out your plane and give you a directive along the line for full cooperation. If necessary, then you have the authority to shoot this Lukyanov on the spot, and then we will issue him as a degenerate. - He laughed into the phone.

Then I heard him talking to someone. Then laughter rang out in the receiver and again

General's voice

- Here they tell me how it is there, carnation, or something, you can organize it ahead of schedule. Something often began to be reborn. So make out carnation, but only without castration.

Laughter rang out again - obviously close friends were buzzing in the general's office. I even heard the shrill giggle of Annushka the foam-thrower. A few seconds later, the general, already seriously, boomed:

— Come on, fly, Lukic! And then the "Gulag" will lead us on the chaff. You know how smart they are.

In the morning I flew to the Far East from our MGB airfield near Moscow. Thanks to Lavrenty Pavlovich - he then began to deploy the military air units of the MGB - and we had our own aviation.

In those years, waiting for some kind of assistance from the army was an empty exercise. Especially after we went through the dachas of some marshals, starting with Zhukov, and found stolen treasures there, like in Ali Baba's cave. But that's another story.

I flew okay. Everything was well organized. A seaplane was waiting at the place of arrival, which took me to the lake only twenty kilometers from the zone where, according to my information, Colonel Lukyanov was supposed to be that day.

Under the leadership of Lukyanov there were zones whose territory was many times larger than Holland and Belgium combined. He himself settled in a rather large regional center, closer to the railway, where the main commandant's office and the main services of this cluster of camps were located. Lukyanov's bush was part of a gigantic feudal domain - Dallag, which stretched its possessions from the Kolyma to the Amur.

In the district center, where the Lukyanovskaya commandant's office was located, there was no longer a district committee or an executive committee. Everyone was swallowed up by the zone. One commandant's office acted as power.

The zone is judged by its central watch, and, apparently, the zone to which we drove up in an American jeep was exemplary. Along the arch over several rows of barbed wire, the words blazed: "Work in the USSR is a matter of honor, valor and heroism!" Below was a portrait of Comrade Stalin, decorated with bright flowers.

Through the gates, in columns of four, the convicts walked, singing in unison the most popular song in the Gulag: "I don't know another country like this, where a person breathes so freely!" The same song blared through loudspeakers installed on the roof of the administrative barracks. The convoy with huge shepherd dogs counted the columns, taking prisoners from the internal guards.

A little further away, like Suvorov watching the march of his miraculous heroes, stood Colonel Lukyanov with several of his officers. From their postures, it could be assumed that the marching convicts were at least ordered to take Berlin again and then advance on Moscow.

Although Lukyanov was informed of my arrival - the seaplane and the jeep belonged to him - when he saw me, he pretended to be terribly surprised and even delighted.

— Lukic! he exclaimed, opening his arms. - I didn't expect it!

We hugged and kissed. Indeed, we had not seen each other for a long time, if we saw each other at all.



"But with us," said Lukyanov, when we had finished the kissing ceremony, "the bucket has passed, that you, Lukich, were slapped last year on the Comintern case. We even quietly drank for the rest of your soul.

"I'll live a long time," I laughed in response, "I've already been spanked five times, Lukyanich, but it's all past. It's hard to aim at me properly. And so far, I've never missed a beat.

He got bored a little. Nobody usually rejoiced at my appearance, because everyone knew that I didn't just appear anywhere, but only as part of the performance of especially important state tasks, compared with which their personal destinies did not mean a shish at all. And if I got into such a wilderness, then one could expect anything.

Therefore, Colonel Lukyanov's fingers visibly trembled when he broke the wax seals on the package that I handed him at the local commandant's office - a cozy wooden house decorated with portraits of comrades Stalin and Dzerzhinsky, which hung right above the porch, like two miraculous icons. By order of Lukyanov, all passing soldiers were to salute, and civilians and convicts were to take off their hats.

Anything could have been in the package that I handed over to Lukyanov. Up to the order to liquidate the zone, and shoot yourself. Therefore, after reading the text, the colonel noticeably cheered up. But not for long.

"Will you take Hakim from me?" he asked without any enthusiasm in his voice. - Will you return?

"I'll try to return it," I promised, "can't you live without it?"

- Did Tyulkin tell you what talents he discovered? - Lukyanov answered a question with a question, - this is a breakthrough in new areas of science. We need to think about priorities. What if there, across the ocean, we are ahead of us?

Here it should be noted that by that time Colonel Lukyanov had managed to defend two doctoral dissertations at the Far Eastern Branch of the Academy of Sciences at once: a doctor of legal and economic sciences. And on Hakim, apparently, he set his sights on the third. This is how the creators of our fundamental science were forged for many decades to come.

Why is he called Hakim? I asked, avoiding a direct answer about our priority in this area.

"His real name is Hakamatsira Imakaze. We call him Hakim for short.

— Can I see his account card? I asked.

"There are no questions," Lukyanov replied, and shouted out the window to someone: "Luzhniki!" Stop smoking! Hakim's card to me, quickly!

Five minutes later, a foreman appeared. Putting his right hand to the cap, and with his left hand giving Lukyanov a square of the prisoner's registration card with a red diagonal stripe, he reported:

"Comrade Colonel, your order has been carried out!"

"You can go," Lukyanov muttered, handing the registration card to me.

First of all, I drew attention to the fact that in the photographs taken, as expected, in front and profile, Khakamatsira Imakaze does not look like a Japanese at all. At least the way I imagined them. What I drew the attention of Colonel Lukyanov.

"That's why they left him to do espionage in our rear, because he doesn't look like a Japanese," the colonel answered confidently, "and if he did, then what fool would leave him in our rear?"

The logic here was iron, and I did not object.

From the registration card, I learned that Khakamatsira Imakaze, an officer of the Kwantung Army, was sent to Tibet even before the war with the aim of sabotage and preparations for the invasion of this high-mountainous region by Japanese militarists. Having infiltrated the local environment, he disguised himself as a Tibetan monk for many years, spreading all kinds of reactionary and pseudoscientific conjectures.

With the outbreak of the Soviet-Japanese war, he was recalled from Tibet to organize sabotage and espionage activities in the rear of the Far Eastern Front. Arrested by the Special Department of the Front in Ulaanbaatar in September 1945. He frankly confessed everything, as a result of which the military tribunal found it possible to replace him with the highest measure with a twenty-five-year term of imprisonment. Year of birth - 1890, nationality - Japanese, place of birth - Japan, the beginning of the term - October 1945, the end of the term - a dash.

Why is he sitting here? I asked Lukyanov, "and not with Japanese prisoners of war?"

A condescending smile appeared on Lukyanov's face.

— What are you, Lukic? he grimaced. What kind of prisoner is he? He is an ordinary saboteur and has no right to the status of a prisoner of war. Now every day he prays to his Japanese god that he would not be shot. A prisoner of war is, first of all, one who was taken in his own military uniform. And this one, Hakim, was taken in our military uniform with the shoulder straps of a senior lieutenant. So everything is legal.

"Okay," I say, "it doesn't really matter much. Set it up the way it should be. Give it to me. We urgently need to return to Moscow.

- Don't hurry! - Lukyanov laughs, - he still needs to be washed in a bathhouse, prepared for a special stage, give out a new pea jacket. And you and I, Lukich, will take a steam bath, expand our blood vessels with cognac, and have many other pleasures.

Only, if you in Moscow with Khakim go out to great science, then do not forget who found this Khakim and, so to speak, gave him a start in life. To me, now, to tell the truth, I don't have time for it. Big things are coming, Lukic! Science will have to be temporarily postponed until better days. And there I will return to Moscow and connect to your experiments. But you return Hakim to the zone when finish.

Lukyanov looked at me suspiciously.

"Or do you want to pardon him?"

"I won't say anything about the pardon," I answered, "but maybe he will have to mow down a third of the term.

- It's not scary, - Lukyanov waved his hand, - you mow him a third, we will add two thirds to him here at the visiting session of the tribunal.

Lukyanov was about to laugh at his own joke, but apparently he remembered something, because he became serious again and said:

- Okay, don't rush to return him to the zone. Attachment is better in some sharaga. Otherwise, I won't be here, maybe he'll disappear here, because a big move is foreseen

special contingent.

— What are you talking about? I didn't understand. Are you planning to transfer somewhere? What move?

In the evening, after a brandy bathhouse, Colonel Lukyanov, who had grown mad, told me the following story.

It turns out that Comrade Stalin, who personally drafted the Turkmen Canal in order to turn the desert into a blooming garden, to the envy of the whole world, wanted something more global. And he decided to start exploring Antarctica.

Scientists presented him with a report that under the ice of the sixth continent, gold and diamonds are not measured. How many - no one knew for sure, but much more than, say, in Kolyma. This was confirmed by Western experts, both in the open press and at secret meetings overheard by our intelligence.

Only in the West, due to the general decay of their capitalist system, did everyone agree that, given the current technical state of the world, it would not be possible to pull out the treasures of Antarctica from under the ice. That, they say, is a matter of the distant future.

But we have been implementing the slogan "Do not wait for favors from nature, but take them from her" for ten years. Confiscate by force, which has already been proven by the example of Kolyma. And Comrade Stalin ordered the development of Antarctica and even himself drew up a plan for the extraction of gold, precious stones and rare earth elements for the next two five-year periods. He explained how and by what means these "wealths to take from under the earth." That is, in this particular case - from under the ice.

In Antarctica, the leader pointed out, it is necessary to bring prisoners from the northern camps, especially those who have experience of surviving in Kolyma or, say, in Norilsk. All those who have already served time should be tracked down and given a second term so that they can work well and for a long time. Set them the usual norm - thirty cubic meters per shift - and let them break the ice with crowbars. And others on drags bring it to the shore and dump it into the sea. The leaders can - as an exception - be escorted.

Here I shook my head doubtfully and told Lukyanov that it was unlikely that all this would work out, especially if the ice was dragged to the shore on drags and dumped into the sea.

- Why won't it work? Lukyanov objected, pouring cognac into a glass from a beautiful bottle with five red stars on the label and a stamp "flattened". — It worked out in Norilsk, it worked out in Kolyma, but why can't it work there? It should work if there is no sabotage. First, build zones, and everything will go there, as everywhere else.

They planned to appoint Lukyanov himself as the commandant of all the Antarctic zones with a promotion directly to lieutenant general.

The prospects and scale of the tasks were breathtaking. He has already begun stockpiling hundreds of thousands of crowbars, axes, picks and coils of barbed wire in Far Eastern ports. By the way, this iron lay there for exactly forty years, until one dashing cooperator, like him there - like, Artyom Bulbov - in one fell swoop sent all the material support of the Antarctic zones over the cordon. I heard somewhere that I paid almost a billion of party contributions alone to the cashier. So here it is. Anyway. It was all later.

In the meantime, the leadership of Dallag is collecting steamers in the ports of Primorye from Magadan to Korsakov, which are supposed to deliver the first batch of prisoners and guards to Antarctica. "Everything should work out," Comrade Stalin himself allegedly said and added sadly, "if they don't impose war on us again."

Is Antarctica our territory? I wondered, feverishly remembering who owns the sixth continent.

Lukyanov explained that formally Antarctica was a draw, but since, as is well known, it was discovered by Russian sailors, the USSR has the full legal right to state its claims against it and achieve their satisfaction in the UN. From the point of view of international law, the priority of the Soviet Union is undeniable.

- Where are they going? Lukyanov chuckled. "They will start to grumble, we will threaten that we will cut all the Jews in our place. Instantly agree.

At night I had a dream that I was walking among the penguins and asking if they had a soul. And they put percentages on crushed ice for me to sign and answer: "We all have one soul!" - and point to Colonel Lukyanov. 5

Hakim, although he did not look like a Japanese, was, like all Japanese, small, thin and very mobile. His face, bordered by a small gray beard, was completely European. He spoke Russian tolerably, I would even say excellent. No worse than Colonel Lukyanov.

"Citizen Imakaze," I said, "you have been selected to conduct experiments of national importance. I know about some of your talents, and therefore I ask you not to use them at the stage. I'm a nervous person and I can shoot your body when your soul walks in no one knows where.

"Nothing will work, citizen chief," he says to me, "it's pointless to shoot at the body when there is no soul in it. The only chance to kill the silver thread that connects the soul with the body.

- What is the thread? - I ask, - where is it, this thread?

"An invisible silver thread," explains Hakim, "it connects the body with the soul when it travels through the stars. If this thread is interrupted, then the soul flies away, and the body dies. But it's very difficult to do this with a bullet, it's better with a grenade.

"If the situation requires it," I promised, "then the grenade won't matter either." But I don't want extreme measures. So I ask you to behave yourself.

The phrase "I ask you to behave decently" has remained with me since the time of the Leninist zone. I often admonished Ilyich with this phrase when he disagreed with proletarian hatred. And he always obeyed and said: "Sorry, my friend, got excited!".

That is why this phrase stuck to me.

"Tell me, citizen Imakaze," I ask, "can you..."

"Don't call me Imakaze," he interrupts me, "just call me Hakim.

- Okay, - I agree, - so tell me, Hakim, can you distinguish between past incarnations of people living now?

"You offend, citizen chief," he answers me, "every dervish knows how to read past incarnations. To do this, you do not need to live in Tibet. For this, there is not enough pork. I can do something even worse than reading incarnations.

— Is that how? I say. "Come on, tell me who I was in my previous life.

"We were nobody, citizen colonel," Hakim smiles, "your soul is young. Lives in the body first life. Such a body is loved, and therefore you will live long. Moreover, your soul is feminine, curious, adventurous, but in alliance with the body is a little limited in its actions. Yesterday, for example, she flew at night to Antarctica, where she met with the soul of Colonel Lukyanov, who is going to build a zone there ...

- Stop! I order. Quiet, Hakim! And then we both will be unhappy!

And I wipe the sweat off my forehead.

"Here, I think, is the answer, how quickly a controlled soul gets to secret information. We can say, to the strategic plans that are still hatched in the government."

"But it won't work," Hakim continues, ignoring my order to be quiet.

Why, I ask, won't it work? Everything that the party has outlined, we will do. There are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not take, Hakim. They will order to take Antarctica - we will take Antarctica too. What can stop us?

I myself understand that I'm talking nonsense, but in what language can the colonel of the MGB still speak with the ZK?

"The war will get in the way," Hakim says.

- War? I ask. Will there still be a war? Soon?

"Soon," Hakim nods his head.

I believe, because Comrade Stalin warned about this more than once.

- And who will win? I ask.

"Friendship will win," Hakim replies.

- Can't you be clearer? - I'm angry.

"It cannot be clearer," Hakim confirms, "both from the future and from the past there are no clear answers. The language of oracles is allegorical. Friendship is also a loose concept. In hugs, sometimes, they will strangle faster than in a fight.

"Okay," I say, "don't be smart. Tell me better, with whom will the war be? With the Americans?"

"The Americans are far away," Hakim answers evasively, "the war will begin in the souls. This is the most terrible war, chief, when the body begins to fight with its own soul. Then the soul turns the energy of the body to anything to rest. And this is where it all starts. Such periods have already happened. Especially in Russia.

"And where did you learn our history so well," I ask suspiciously, "in the intelligence center?"

- No, - Hakim suddenly stuns me, - I did not study at any intelligence center. And I know the history of Russia well, because I myself am Russian.

"Don't make a hunchback," I switched to Zekov's slang, "otherwise I'll send you back to the zone." What kind of Russian are you, if the card clearly says - Japanese. And your birthplace is Japan. And the verdict was read to you in Japanese through an interpreter. Don't mess with my head, please. Because if you are Russian, then your sentence may be reviewed. So you were tried as a foreign citizen, and so they will hang another treason

homeland in the form of espionage. And this is already a true "tower", even though it has now been officially canceled.

By this time we had already reached Moscow back. At the airport, my general met me with a car.

"The golden frame," I report, "where will we place it, Comrade General?" On the Lubyanka or at some point?

Are you out of your mind, Lukic? the general asks, "take me to your house, keep him in your apartment, don't let him go anywhere. We will allocate money for its maintenance. And, come on, work!

The money for the maintenance of Hakim was supposed to be 3 rubles 70 kopecks per day, plus another 30 kopecks as "commercial travel allowance". The general decided not to waste time on trifles and immediately counted out 300 rubles to me.

- Nothing is a pity, - he will declare, - just give the result. And not a word to anyone until I personally check everything.

I brought Hakim to my house, put a cot, bought bread, sausages and a "small one" to lubricate the relationship.

"No, no," Hakim refused, "I don't drink, Citizen Chief." I don't take it in my mouth. A drop of alcohol can lead to unpredictable disaster.

"Well, it will be," I exhort, "what a catastrophe there is!" We'll send you back to the zone or shoot you here. And deal with the end. Let's come up with something in the report. We will write that we sent you to conduct geological exploration in Antarctica together with Colonel Lukyanov. By the way, he wanted to take you with him on the first boat. Along with crowbars and thorns.

- Colonel Lukyanov will not go to Antarctica, - Hakim answers, - he will not go. Because Comrade Stalin himself is interested in his dissertation on the economics of socialism. This makes Colonel Lukyanov so nervous that he will die in some local luxurious hospital.

"Interesting," I think, "in our Lubyanka, almost everyone knew that Comrade Stalin was writing a book on the economics of socialism. Did Lukyanov send Hakim's soul to peep the leader's theses for plagiarism in his dissertation? Or Hakim proactively read the Stalinist manuscript and suggested the theses to Lukyanov. Now, with Lukyanov's dissertation, the VAK reported to the leader, and Stalin, of course, will give the command to figure out how the documents from his desk became known to some colonel Lukyanov from the far Siberian zone. The disassembly, of course, will begin with the fact that Lukyanov will be taken. He - there is no doubt about it - will immediately hand over Hakim. In other words, me too."

"Yes," I sighed, "you won't live to be 100 years old with such assignments, Lukich."

"All right," I say to Hakim, "don't drink if your soul doesn't take it." I'll drink alone. And what will happen to me - can you tell me? Will I get a general?

"No," Hakim answers, "you, citizen colonel, will not be a general. And don't dream. When the soul lives its first life, the body never rises high, but at the same time it does not fall into the abyss. I have already said that your soul is female, it intuitively does not climb high, but looks more closely. She is interested in everything, because you probably know a lot of things that others are not supposed to know, and neither do you.

— Your health, Hakim! I raised my glass, clinked glasses and drank. My soul, although female, according to Hakim, but accepted it well. I chewed on a sausage and ask

Hakima:

- So you say that you are Russian? How did you manage to turn into a Japanese?

And Hakim told me this story.

He was born in St. Petersburg. His name is Savely Alexandrovich Volzhsky. In 1911 he graduated from the Faculty of Oriental Languages of St. Petersburg University. The following year, in 1912, he left for Tibet, as he was always interested in the mystical teachings of the East. Passed a full cycle of obedience in one of the Tibetan monasteries, and then became a monk. He was even approached by the Dalai Lama. He was acquainted with the artist Nicholas Roerich and his wife. At this time, he was caught by the then foreign department of the NKVD.

Under the guise of a wandering monk, he wandered around the rear of the Kwantung Army, collecting information for the needs of our Far Eastern Front. After the events at Khalkin Gol, he returned to the USSR and served as an interpreter at the front headquarters in Khabarovsk. From the very beginning of the Soviet-Japanese war, he was the personal translator of General Purkaev. Somehow he was sent by a general to Ulaanbaatar to negotiate with the Mongolian comrades about cavalry fodder. In Ulaanbaatar, shouting "Japanese! Japanese!" was arrested by the counterintelligence officers of Marshal Choibalsan, who, to the surprise of Savely Alexandrovich, spoke only in Japanese, and he was forced to answer them in the same language.

The Mongolian special officers handed over Volzhsky to ours, who immediately began to treat him in Japanese. All attempts by Volzhsky to start speaking Russian were thwarted by an interpreter from the Pacific Fleet. The same interpreter was at Volzhsky and at the meeting of the tribunal.

Savely Alexandrovich's explanations and his personal documents seized with him for some reason served as a sincere confession and material evidence that he, an officer of the Kwantung Army, used fake documents in the name of Senior Lieutenant Volzhsky when performing a spy-sabotage mission.

At the same time, they wanted to sew on him the murder of Volzhsky in order to take possession of his uniform and documents, but, fortunately, the check showed that no Volzhsky Savely Alexandrovich was listed in the personnel of the Far Eastern Front. Therefore, Volzhsky got off with 25 years in the camps.

I poured myself another shot and drank. He ate bread.

"Interesting," I said, "but not very plausible, dear Hakim. You tell me these tales in the hope that I will not be able to verify them. And, meanwhile, they are checked in six seconds. Those who hung around at large headquarters during the war were all on a special account. Nothing worth checking. Especially translators. After all, there were seven of them during the war with Japan.

- Check. - says Hakim, - you will see that I am telling the pure truth.

I pick up the phone in front of him and call the personnel officer assigned to the Personnel Department of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. It can be said that he did not leave work at all, since applications poured in from the Kremlin like confetti at a New Year's holiday. And every third application comes from Comrade Stalin's apparatus. That is to find out, then another. Where did he serve, where did he come from, isn't it time to plant ...

The personnel officer recognized me by my voice, he said:

— Hello, Lukic, why can't you sleep?

"There is a small matter," I answer, "look, if you please, the translators who were at the front headquarters at the time the war with Japan began.

- And you, for an hour, do not know under which general he worked? - the special officer clarifies, - then I will find it in an instant.

- I know, - I say, - under Purkaev.

- Can you wait by the phone? I'll tell you now.

While he was looking, I, without hanging up, asked Hakim:

"Why aren't you eating anything?" Have a bite.

"Thank you," he replies, "I'm not hungry, chief.

He didn't eat anything on the road, but I heard from Lukyanov that he gave his rations to others in the zone.

- Can you do without food? I asked, but before Hakim could answer, a special officer appeared again on the other end of the line with information:

— Lukich, are you listening to me? Purkaev had two translators: one was a Mongol. Now I will read his last name: Shamloratoramsel. He drank and died. Buried in Ulaanbaatar. The second is a Georgian - Imakadze. There is no name. Initials only - X.P. Previously worked for TASS. But he is exposed as a Japanese spy, got a term. Look for him through the Gulag.

I thanked my colleague, hung up the phone and asked:

— Hakim, aren't you a Georgian by any chance?

"No," he answers, "Imakaze was a Georgian. And I'm Russian. Volzhsky Savely Alexandrovich.

"Okay," I say, "and who else in your group was an interpreter?"

There was only one Mongol. He knew twenty oriental languages, - Hakim sighs, - his name was Shamloratoramsel. He once had alcohol poured into a cup of amesto milk as a joke. He drank and died. I accompanied his coffin to Ulaanbaatar, where I was arrested.

- And he called himself Imakaze. I continue. - For what?

"Well, why did I need to be called Imakadze," Hakim almost pleaded, "when I had with me an officer's book addressed to Savely Alexandrovich Volzhsky, a travel order, a certificate and a personal letter from General Purkaev to Marshal Choibalsan, which I myself translated into Mongolian. Immediately after their arrest, they filed a protocol in the name of Imakaze, a Japanese spy. That's what they called me from then on.

"Where did Imakaze himself go?" I asked, feeling the back of my head ache.

"Actually, I shouldn't have told you this," Hakim said somehow guiltily, "but there was no Imakaze among the translators at the headquarters. Imakaze is a warm wind blowing from the Japanese islands, revered by Korean, Chinese and Japanese fishermen while catching saury ...

- Enough! I interrupted him rather rudely. "Stop rubbing my ears, Hakim. And then I'll get angry, the word of the Chekist! Do you know what we usually do after we hear stories like this? We send them to think about their behavior in special cells, where there is ten to fifteen centimeters of water on the floor and there is no bed or stool. Me bye



no matter who you are or where you come from. The main thing is that you are able to complete the task assigned to us.

"I see, boss," he says, "I won't tell you more about myself. And I spent a total of two years in cells like you said, and even in the winter with the window open.

- And what? I ask. - Liked?

"You do not understand the main thing," Hakim patiently explains to me, "that with a wandering soul, especially if it is controlled, the external environment does not matter. Even if they had thrown me into the water with a weight on my feet or buried me alive, nothing terrible would have happened. Perhaps somewhere in the third week I felt a slight discomfort and was released.

With these words, he removes the kettle from the stove and, before I can get the gun, pours boiling water over his hands. Then he laid the tile in spirals down on the palm of his hand. I smelled like burnt meat. But it turned out, as Hakim explained to me, showing completely intact hands, that on my part it was just self-hypnosis.

"But he could pour this teapot on me and run away," I thought, growing cold, "what would I say to the general then?"

"In order to escape," Hakim read my thoughts, "I don't need to pour a boiling kettle on your head at all, Citizen Chief. If I want, you will do everything yourself, citizen chief. Here, make sure. You have a loaded gun in your pocket. Give it to me, please.

Like a fool, I take out my captured Walter and hand it to him. He takes it, takes out the clip and gives it all back to me. I'm sitting all sweaty.

"So how," I ask, "with such talents, you swelled up in the zone for so many years?" And didn't run away? Or what rebellion did not raise?

- For what? he wonders. - The zone, citizen chief, is the best place for people like me. You don't understand this.

And how many like you? I ask.

"Where," he asks again, "in the zone?"

"No," I say, "in the world? Or in our country?"

"Fortunately," he replies, "not very much. It is a very difficult preparation, but it is necessary to pass it, already having the necessary inclinations. By the way, you guarded one of our sixteen years in the zone. He accumulated energy in the zone. In other places it is much more difficult.

It threw me into a fever. How does he know such things that even people's commissars were not supposed to know about? What if they're eavesdropping now? Blockage!

- Quiet! I ask. "Just don't call any names, you fool!" And then we'll disappear together.

And episodes pop into my head. True, I never sent Ilyich to a cell with water and rats, but when he was especially rowdy, I sometimes handcuffed him to a water pipe. And he looked at me with his eyes of unearthly kindness and said: "Thank you, Vasily Lukich. So leave me for five days. Don't show up. contemplate

necessary". Yes, even in the royal prison he swallowed inkwells in front of the guards. Later they came up with a fairy tale that they were filled with bread and milk. And I myself read the documents that these were the most ordinary bronze inkwells of a state-owned sample, filled with ink from turpentine alcohol with graphite on kerosene.

"This man," Hakim read my thoughts again, "I mean the man whose last name you, Citizen Colonel, did not allow to mention aloud, decided to use the sacred Gift of Heaven and Earth in order to become the ruler of the world, forgetting that this gift can only be used for reflection in search of truth. Due to many circumstances, it is absolutely impossible to become the ruler of the world. But that's another matter. The main thing is that it is wildly uninteresting. Do you understand, boss? Do not understand? Well, let's say your basement is full of rats. Do you want to become their master? Of course not! But if you want, then for the rest of your life you will have to snoop around the basement with a lantern, trying to bring the rats to obedience and mercilessly destroy them at the same time. This is interesting? They tried to explain this to your ward, but, nevertheless, he decided to try, while choosing the darkest basement. You know better than me what happened next. Only a few years had passed before he realized that this was not interesting and asked to enter the zone. Do you know that he went there voluntarily?

"I only know," I replied, "what I am supposed to know. And if I'm not supposed to know something, then I'm not interested.

"Perhaps you are not interested," Hakim agreed, "but your soul trembles all over, how much it wants to know everything. And your body does not want to leave. Where can you find the second one?

I finished my vodka and said: — Okay. The morning is wiser than the evening. Let's go sleep. We'll start working tomorrow. 6

I had an idea to fasten Hakim by the arm and leg with handcuffs to a folding bed for the night so that he would not run away. But then I abandoned that thought. Run away - run away. Maybe it will be better for everyone. True, they can imprison me, but this is still in question. Rather, my general will be dragged: how could a "convict" from Dallag come from in my apartment. Most likely, they would have hissed a little and hushed it up. And I would return to the academy to gnaw, so to speak, the granite of science. That's why I went to bed, the gun, however, I put it under my pillow, but it's just to clear my conscience. And fell asleep.

In the morning I rubbed my eyes, I looked - Hakim was lying on a cot, his mouth was open, he was not breathing. It means that his soul is wandering around somewhere again, sniffing out state secrets. I felt his pulse - there was no pulse, and went to wash and shave.

I go out into the kitchen, and there he is sitting on the linoleum in Turkish style, his eyes are closed and something in sings in a low voice not in our language.

For fun, I looked into the room again to see what was being done on the cot. Hakim lies on a cot, as he lay, with his mouth open, dead.

I'm back in the kitchen. He is already sitting there, but with open eyes.

"Hello," he says, "citizen chief. How did you sleep?

- And who is there on the cot? I ask.

- Do not you worry. He will lie down, lie down and disappear. Phantoms have their own problems. I'll tell you later.

"You need to warn me," I grumbled, "but he won't stink the whole apartment until he disappears?"

"Don't worry, citizen of the fire department," Hakim smiles, "they emit only ozone.

"I'll put a bullet in him next time," I promised.

"Only you will scare the neighbors," Hakim warned, "there is nothing more stupid than shooting at phantoms. It's like shooting at the clouds.

I looked into the room again. The cot was empty and didn't smell of anything. I was about to make us both scrambled eggs, but these phantom jokes took away my appetite.

- Will you have breakfast? I asked Hakim.

"Thank you," he bowed, "I've had breakfast."

"Okay," I agreed, "I don't feel like eating either. So what is this phantom? What is his function in all this hell?

"It is not functional," Hakim replies, "it is a kind of gasket between the body and the soul. It is sometimes called the astral body.

"Yes, yes," I muttered, "Annie Besant wrote something about it. Only I did not understand anything.

"You started your training on this complex issue with Annie Besant in vain," said Hakim, "the fact is that she herself did not understand anything about what she narrated in her lectures. It can be quite considered a damaged phone.

"You really understand a lot," I snapped, "they won't lock up a book in a special fund without work.

"Nevertheless," Hakim continues, "one cannot teach others without understanding not only the details of the question, but even its essence.

- Do you understand yourself? - I get more and more angry. Apparently he didn't sleep well.

"But I don't teach anyone," Hakim objects, "I try to comprehend the essence of the great cycle of soul and body. Rather, I do it for myself, and not for the good of mankind. I don't write books and I don't give lectures. And if I do something, it is only at the request of others. As in your case. I don't even preach any secret doctrines, like, say, Blavatsky.

- Who is she? I'm interested.

"There was one," explains Hakim, "she lived in Russia. Aunt of your famous minister, Count Witte.

- Did they slap her? I ask.

- No, - Hakim answers, - she was honored to die before the 17th year. And Annie Besant fled abroad.

"Listen, Hakim," I don't understand, "but why did you get out of your Himalayas and contact the NKVD. Would he live there quietly in a monastery and not know grief?

"From false feelings of patriotism," Hakim confessed, "I also fell into pride. The ego is inevitable in the search for truth. But an attempt to benefit humanity with the knowledge of the truth has always ended in a zone at best. And do you know why?

- Why? I asked stupidly.

"Because there is no truth," Hakim announced.

"And frank confession is the queen of evidence," I laughed for the first time all morning, "are you quoting Vyshinsky to me?"

"Vyshinsky..." Hakim muttered, "Vyshinsky?" Who is he?

So, I scored my first return goal.

"One of the great initiates," I said importantly, "in his public lectures, which he has much more than Annie Besant, he proved that truth as such simply does not exist, and therefore there is nothing to strive to achieve it.

"I didn't read it," Hakim honestly admitted, "I didn't even hear it. But he is wrong. The truth is far away, it is impossible to reach it in the current state of minds, but one should constantly strive for this. Otherwise, a person will quickly degenerate to the level of an ordinary mammal, suitable, according to Seneca, only for sacrifice.

He paused, and then asked: "Where can one read this Vyshinsky?"

On my shelf was a volume of lectures by the former Prosecutor General, borrowed from the academic library for some seminar. But I decided not to give the book to Hakim, so as not to spoil impression.

"A very rare book," I lied, "but if you behave, I'll try to get it for you." Just wondering why you are arguing with him? A minute ago, you yourself told me that truth does not exist.

"Indeed," Hakim replied in a low voice, "no one has yet been able to prove its existence. But this does not mean that it does not exist and that one should not strive for it. That's what I'm arguing about. Vyshinsky's opinion is a typical opinion of a black pagan who denies the Divine principle of existence...

- Quiet, quiet! I interrupted him. - Do not bring anti-Soviet! Are we in agreement with you?

He fell silent.

'Actually,' I continued, 'in our language it's called 'inconsistent and contradictory testimony'. It can be seen that in theory you are all confused and really do not know anything. There is no invoice. And the fact that everyone has a gift, like you, for example, you yourself do not know where you got it from. It is so?

"But the human mind has not yet been given the opportunity to rise above a certain limit," confessed Hakim, "if it could rise to an open Divine revelation, then it would have to blow up its own cranium. I don't see, Citizen Chief, there are no contradictions here.

- And the soul? I didn't agree. "A soul that roams freely wherever it pleases. She needs to figure everything out...

What is "and"? Hakim asked.

"And to report," I said, "when she returns to the body, she must report on her impressions and explain what's what?

"She is trying," Hakim answered, "but, firstly, she never tells much and in plain text, and secondly, we simply do not understand much of what she is trying to tell us. We cannot comprehend this with the mind, which is still not at all developed and is prone to suspicion.

"And he is not sure if he is being told the truth," I developed Hakim's thought, "in other words, a person never knows whether he is being fooled or not.

"If they are fooling," Hakim agreed, "then by a very large account. For example, your ward - I know for sure - was constantly trying to suggest that his conclusion about the inevitability of world wars in the era of imperialism is simply absurd, since humanity was already on the verge of discovering new types of weapons, in particular, atomic weapons. But he brushed it off because he did not understand, although he always treated ideas related to mass destruction, to put it mildly, favorably. He was sure, due to a misinterpretation of the signals, that the only way to a brighter future was through the Everests of corpses, as in a fairy tale, when first they sprinkle dead water, then live water, and then they all rush together into a huge cauldron of boiling tar. But he was so captivated by his hallucinations that he could not even imagine that a new weapon would appear first not with him.

I did not develop Hakim's thoughts regarding the mistakes made by the leader of the world proletariat. The old man was not at all as simple and stupid as Hakim thought. For some reason, everyone thinks that he worked in the name of the triumph of socialism. And this is not so at all. And I, as a witness, am ready to swear that socialism was the last thing I thought about Ilyich. But I think that it was extremely difficult for Hakim with his idealistic-bourgeois views to understand such things, if not impossible. The old man, just, did everything in his power to ensure that the Americans got the atomic weapon first, and then sold it to us for such money that there could no longer be any construction of socialism, even if someone thought about it. and speech. Comrade Stalin also seized on the idea of "zones" not because of a good life, but because after the disappearance of Ilyich there was not even a broken penny in the country.

"Your qualities and talents," I said to Hakim, not noticing that I called him "you", "are certainly worthy of admiration and study. But I must say that many of your calculations based on inferences suffer greatly from a lack of information. This means that either you yourself also cannot understand exactly what your controlled soul is telling you, or it very cleverly presents you with misinformation for some purpose known only to it.

— Is it so important? Hakim was surprised. I may be mistaken in some details that the same soul did not pay attention to, but I do not think that the essence of the problem would suffer much from this.

"But you and I," I objected, "we will have to deal with the details, because in the assignment I received, the essence of the problem is known to every schoolchild.

"I know what you want to find out from me," Hakim admitted, "and if I haven't said a word about this yet, it's only because, Citizen Colonel, that I'm not at all sure about it ...

He fell silent.

- What are you not sure about? I asked.

"You see, citizen chief..." Hakim began in an uncertain voice.

"Don't call me 'Citizen Chief' again," I demanded.

- What should I call you? Hakim didn't understand. — Comrade Colonel?

"Call me Vasily Lukich," I grimaced, "or just Lukich. And then from your "fenya" my head hurts.

"So, Lukich," continues Savely Alexandrovich, "there is such a thing as the burden of knowledge. Extra knowledge never or almost never benefits its owner. Especially for someone in your profession.

— Well, it's like saying, — I do not agree, — extra knowledge really helps. Anyway, me. So I'm ready to listen to your information and even record it, as usual.

"As you wish," Hakim shrugged his shoulders, "it's my job to warn you." But you will still have to be patient and listen to a short introductory lecture. For a better understanding of the next.

"I'm ready," I answer, sitting down comfortably ...

"Soul, Vasily Lukich," Hakim began his lecture, "the category, as we have already seen, is rather strange. She serves her body, but is equally capable of elevating and destroying this body. It is difficult to understand what she is guided by in this case. Therefore, in order not to get into the occult jungle, let's say that the soul is guided by some of its own whims. However, like any teacher. The fate of any student depends very much on the whims of the teacher. Do you agree, Vasily Lukich?

I silently nodded.

"It is impossible to trace or comprehend all the whims of the soul," Hakim continued, "however, there is one, I would say, the main whim of the soul, which became obvious to occultists a long time ago.

- And what is this whim? I asked.

"I'll try to explain it to you intelligibly," Savely Alexandrovich answers, "and, if you allow, I'll start with a rather hackneyed anecdote that I heard for the first time on the sidelines of the St. Petersburg Society of Theosophy Lovers back, God forbid, in the year nine hundred and nine or ten. Its essence is this: someone received a prediction from a gypsy that he was destined to burn in the fire. That was what he feared the most. Therefore, he decided to deceive fate and, in contrast to the prediction he received, decided to drown himself. That is, to die not from fire, as it was predicted to him, but from water and, as it were, of his own free will. Mentally saying goodbye to everyone, he went out onto one of the Neva bridges and jumped into the water. At that moment, a steamer appeared from under the bridge, and the unfortunate man landed right in his pipe. And burned in the furnace. Do you understand what I want to say, Vasily Lukich?

- What is incomprehensible here, - I say, - there is an old folk wisdom - "what will be, will not be avoided."

- That's it! Hakim rejoiced. - Which have not be avoided! The subconscious faith of the people in the predestination of all things. But it's not only that. The question is somewhat broader and, if you like, more ominous than it seems at first glance. The fact is that the main whim of the soul manifests itself precisely at the moment when it decides to receive an order to leave this or that body forever.

- And what is this order? I ask, even though I'm starting to guess myself.

"And it lies in the fact," replies the samurai Imakaze, "that she always does it one and

in the same way.

"Explain," I ask.

"I'll explain," Hakim says, and his eyes light up, "one soul likes to go away in fire, and all the bodies in which it was burned. Do not think that they are then cremated. No. They burn alive under a variety of circumstances: a domestic fire, a car or plane crash, and so on. The other soul loves to escape through the water, and all the bodies it has been in for nearly five thousand years have drowned under a variety of circumstances, from a bathtub to sea disasters, from a drunken accident in a pond to the sinking of a submarine. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I nod my head.

"Some souls," Hakim continues, "love certain illnesses—I won't list them—others love edged weapons: knives, swords, swords, axes, sabers, sharpeners; the third - percussion weapons: clubs, flails, maces, sledgehammers, hammers, crowbars, cobblestones and bricks; the fourth likes the body to fall from somewhere from a height: an unopened parachute, falling out of a window, falling into an abyss, a simple fall from a tree or stairs ...

"That's enough," I interrupted him, "do not list. I got it. And there are no exceptions?"

"Not as far as I know," he replied.

What way does my soul love? I asked.

"Your soul, as I have already told you, lives the first life. Her whims are still unknown," Hakim spread his hands.

- And yours? I ask.

"My soul," Savely Alexandrovich blushes, "loves to leave the body forever through alcohol intoxication.

He said this in an apologetic tone, from which it appeared that he was very ashamed of the vagaries of his soul.

"That's why I don't take even a drop of alcohol in my mouth," he added.

- And how can all this end? - I'm curious - will you live forever, like some of our mutual friends?

- You correctly said: "What will be, that cannot be avoided," Savely Alexandrovich answers, "and this cannot be avoided. Someday I will confuse water with vodka, drink it and die. Or something else will happen. You never know. One of my predecessors, who carried the same soul in his body, was also aware of its whims and did not take a drop in his mouth. As a result, he was drowned in a barrel of wine. The soul will always find a way to satisfy its main whim.

"It must have been in the Middle Ages," I inquired to suggest, "I even saw something similar in the cinema based on some play by Shakespeare. There one brother drowns another in a barrel of wine. This is not your predecessor?"

"No," Hakim sighs, "my soul has never visited princes. You talked about the Middle Ages. And try now in the zone not to drink to the godfather's health when he offers you. Do you know how this could end?"

I was silent, going over in my mind different situations when it is absolutely impossible to refuse drinking. 7

"If you have mastered the introduction," Savely Alexandrovich said, "then you probably understand that I did not give all these examples in order to discuss my soul or yours.

"Yes," after a pause, I squeezed out of myself, "I understand.

"And you keep insisting," Hakim asked, "that I turn the conversation from our souls to, how should I say, the soul that was meant when giving you the task?"

Where was she in a past life? I answered a question with a question to gain time.

"Believe me, nothing interesting," said Hakim, "a petty thief and pimp who trades in the slums of Marseilles.

I felt goosebumps running down my spine.

- And the year before last? I asked in a shaky voice.

"Even worse," said Savely Alexandrovich, "not a very successful swindler in Portsmouth. Before that, he was a card sharper in Prague. Very small. You will not find the ends in any reference books. Is it possible to delve into church books and police archives, if they have been preserved.

I put my head in my hands. And not at all because I was so stunned by what I heard, but because I understood what story I got into. And I haven't seen a way out yet.

"And this soul also has its last whim?" I asked in a low voice without raising my head.

"Yes," Savely Alexandrovich sighed.

- And what is he like? I raised my head and put my hands on the table.

So they sit in the car when they see a big pothole ahead. But I did not see a pothole, but a concrete wall that I was going to crash into at full speed.

So, her whim? I repeated the question. My soul, apparently, also adored the thrill. No wonder she lived her first life and was still unafraid.

— Her whim? - Hakim asked again and answered, - her whim is a bullet!

"Bullet," I echoed, "that means everyone went through the bullet. In other words, everyone was shot?

"Yes," Hakim admitted guiltily, "everyone. And one more detail is important. In all cases, we are talking about bullets fired by the police. In one of the lives - the most vivid - he was a police sergeant. He was shot by his own during some kind of showdown about money and women.

- And what does it mean? - My voice is completely dead. I pulled out the unfinished "small" from the window, exactly half a glass in size, and drank in one gulp, sniffing with my finger.

- Well, why are you silent, Hakim? I almost yelled. - Come on, make a deal!

- What are you so upset about? Imakaze asked with a purely Asian sadism, is he your relative?



This somewhat cynical Japanese phrase, oddly enough, brought me to my senses.

"He is the common relation of all of us," I replied, "for, as you well know, he is the father of all nations. And Japanese too.

"That means," Imakaze said in a tone to me, "we will all soon become orphans.

"Are you saying that he, too, will be shot, like everyone else?" I asked, surprised at the calmness of my voice.

"Unfortunately, this is so," Hakim said, "I warned you that the extra...

"Shut up," I interrupted him, "do you understand what you are talking about?" Who will shoot him?

"The police, like everyone else," Savely Alexandrovich said calmly, "if you like, Vasily Lukich, it is the duty of the police to destroy people like him.

"There is no police in our country," I blurted out, clutching at straws.

- This is a generalized name, - explained Hakim, - in many cases it was called differently. This is not about the name, but about the function of the organization. At all times, these were police functions. You, Vasily Lukich, also serve in the police.

"I serve in the MGB," I declared with some defiance, "and not in some stinking police there!"

— What's the difference, — shrugged the Japanese, — what to call it? You serve in the political police. It can also be called the secret police, you can call it the security police. The essence of the matter does not change.

"Are you saying," I became furious, "that we will shoot Comrade Stalin?"

"It turns out that it is," he agreed, "there is no one else. When a policeman is driven to extremes, he shoots. At least because he can't do anything else. It's his reflex, instinct, if you will.

"Listen, Hakim," I said, "do you understand what you are saying? I need to report this to my superiors. There is no other evidence other than your words. So, in the report I will have to refer only to you. Can you imagine what will happen to you when the authorities start to spin this whole thing? Therefore, if you decided to laugh at me and came up with all this, my advice to you is to think again. Maybe you got something wrong there? You have not seen Comrade Stalin in the eye. Couldn't those occult pranksters have given you someone else?

"No, Vasily Lukich," he answers with a sigh, "there is absolutely no mistake here. Moreover, everything I have said will happen very soon. And you will see that I was right. There is karma, and dear Vasily Lukich, you can't get away from it.

- Well, - I say, - and if now your warnings are taken with due seriousness and all measures are taken to protect Comrade Stalin from any contact with ... Well, with those whom you call policemen?

"I would not like," Hakim said in a dull voice, "to tell you a second anecdote about a man who, wishing to drown himself, jumped from a bridge and fell into the pipe of a steamer.

So there's nothing to be prevented? I tried to find out.

"Alas," Hakim replied without much sorrow.

"So," I summed up the preliminary results, "now, citizen Imakaze, please state everything that you have told me in writing.

"All right," he agreed, "give me a pen and paper."

- Write, - I ordered, - to the head of the 3rd Directorate of the MTB of the USSR, lieutenant-general of state security Belov Yu.A. Did you write? A little lower: from citizen Imakadze X., convicted under Art. 58-4, who is serving a sentence in the institution of post box 7613. And tell me everything that you said orally. You can start like this: "Thanks to my unconventional forecasting abilities, I became aware of the following ..." Colon - and state.

He began to write something, constantly dipping his pen into the inkwell, and I began to think about the situation.

So, thanks to the assigned task, I managed to present Comrade Stalin with another gift on the day of his seventieth birthday, that is, I became aware that an assassination attempt was being prepared on Comrade Stalin. Moreover, not somewhere overseas or in Belgrade, but in the bowels of our native department. How can I manage the information received in order to keep my own head on my shoulders and prevent the impending cataclysm in the country? Because the murder of Stalin by any of the branches of our service, in my opinion, should cause a strong shock in the country.

But how to protect Comrade Stalin from communicating with him? After asking myself a similar question, I quickly realized that it was absolutely impossible to do just that. Comrade Stalin's bodyguards are us, Comrade Stalin's attendants are us again, Comrade Stalin's doctors are us, Comrade Stalin's apparatus is again us. He himself created such a system. We have always been considered a fighting detachment of the party, but gradually turned the party itself into its own ideological body, into some kind of small sub-department whose task was solely to justify our actions.

So what should I do? Get an appointment with Comrade Stalin himself? Hopelessly. My head will be turned off when I just mention it. Report? But to whom? General Belov? Imagine what will happen to him when I say the first words. Who to consult?

Then I remembered that the former chief of the Gestapo, Gruppenfuehrer Heinrich Müller, is now working as a teacher in our academy. He gave lectures on the intra-chamber development of the arrested. I must say that in the Gestapo the practice of intra-chamber developments was much better established than in our country. Therefore, the former lecturer, the famous Colonel Rhodes, was expelled from the academy and fired from the organs, giving the chair to Papa Muller, as everyone affectionately called him. In addition, Muller taught an interesting elective at the academy called "Conspiracy Theory".

Almost no one went to the elective, but I did not miss a single one. I helped him take everything off and take it to the technical office. He sympathized with me and affectionately called me "Lukits", because our letter "h" was badly pronounced. Papa Muller spoke Russian quite tolerably, and during the war years I also more or less picked up German. So we understood each other very well. True, Papa Muller, like all former Gestapo men, was a little obsessed with Jews, but this did not spoil his lectures in the least. Rather, on the contrary. "To carry out a coup in any country," Muller taught, "it is enough to throw a stone in the window of some Jewish shop. And then things will go automatically."

"It's decided," I thought, "before doing anything, I'll consult with Papa Muller. He will tell you exactly what to do."

While I was thinking, Hakim finished his work and handed me two sheets of paper. I

looked and froze.

- You what! Kidding me?! I yelled, throwing the papers on the table.

- What don't you like? he wondered.

What language did you write it in? I say, pointing my fingers at the hieroglyphs.

"In Tibetan," Hakim admitted modestly.

Why in Tibetan? I howled. - Who will read it?

"Because I can't write in Russian," he replies.

- What nonsense! - I was indignant, - how can you not write in Russian when you speak our language so well?

- I learned to speak in the zone, - he continued to insist on his own, - but not to write. According to the Code of Criminal Procedure, citizen chief, I have the right to be interrogated in my native language with an interpreter. Thank you for not using this right.

"Thank you," I said, thinking that it was even very good that Hakim's testimony was written in Tibetan. Let them read! No translator will be allowed to access this material even a mile away!

Now something had to be done with Hakim himself. Where to put it? Don't keep him in my apartment all the time. We must call General Belov and ask for further instructions. I was already a little surprised why he did not call me and was not interested in how things were going.

Do you have anything to add to your testimony? I asked Hakim more as a formality. To such testimony, as they say, neither add nor subtract.

"I want to warn you again that you don't have as much time as you think," he said.

I handcuffed him to a steam radiator and went to call the general.

For a long time no one came. Then an unfamiliar voice answered. I asked General Belov to the phone.

- And who asks him? the voice asked.

I called a three-digit communication code number. There was silence. Then the voice said, "He's on sick leave." They hung up the phone.

I dialed the general's home phone. Again, no one came for a long time. Finally they picked up the phone, but did not answer, and somewhere in the distance I could hear a hysterical female voice shouting: "Idiot! I always knew you were an idiot! My God! What a fool I was!" Then a firm male voice, full of significance, said authoritatively into the receiver: "Hello!"

"I'll ask General Belov," I answered.

"You," said the voice, apparently handing over the phone to the general.

"I'm listening," the familiar general's baritone rang out in the receiver.

"I wish you good health, comrade general," I reported cheerfully, "permit me to report, your

order completed!

- No!!! the general yelled suddenly. "I didn't... order you anything!" I don't know you at all! Who are you? You are a provocateur!!! You never obeyed me at all! I have witnesses that...

Here the general's voice fell silent, and again a voice filled with authority was heard: "Lukic, is that you or what? What are you doing to bring a person to a heart attack?"

And I recognized the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov.

— Zyuganych? I was surprised. What are you doing there with the general?

- I'm conducting a search, - said Zyuganov, - can you imagine, Lukich, in that book - four Belovs - chamberlains, two - generals, the rest - White Guards. I looked in the telephone directory, and there were three hundred Belovs, if not more. I call the management, and they tell me: "Start with this address." True, he was not in the telephone directory, but this descendant of the chamberlains managed to penetrate our organs! Imagine, Lukich!

I wished Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov further success in his laborious work and hung up.

Before I had time to recover from the information received from Hakim, someone had already dealt a blow to General Belov, who had given me this task and kept it under his control. One wondered why this blow was on him, and not on me or both of us? And what role does Hakim himself play in this story?

What should I do with him now? I could send him to our internal prison in Lubyanka, registering him in such a way that no one but me could call him for interrogation. But if tomorrow they take me myself (the general will probably hand me over), then Hakim will turn into a very undesirable witness. The thought crossed my mind to take him somewhere to Medvedkovo and shoot him out of harm's way, but I refused it, firstly, because I already knew how difficult it was to do this, and secondly, I might still need Hakim as my own weapon. Let me keep it for now.

I took him to the bath and chained him to a water pipe.

- For what? - he asked.

"That's the way it is," I replied, "I know it won't cost you anything to get free." But I'll have to answer, and I'll say that I took precautions... And if I don't take them at all, I'm going to hit hard when you run away. Basically, I have nothing against it. Run away if you want. Especially if you believe what you say. Lukyanov will also be arrested soon and he will not have time for his dissertation. But you'd better stay for now, I might need you some more. Do not answer the phone, do not answer the call or knock on the door. If someone starts to break the door, then decide for yourself what to do. But best of all, release your soul and hang here, as it were, dead on a handcuff. And then try to contact me with the help of your various tricky little things. Understood? And I need to go now. Just in case - goodbye, sorry if something is wrong. In that world, we'll meet, we'll reconcile. 8

First of all, I made sure that no one was watching my apartment or me. Being able to detect surveillance is the basics of our profession. If you don't know how to do this, you simply have nothing to do in state security, where everyone is watching each other.

Convinced of this, I took a tram and went to the academy. I needed to meet Papa Muller and consult with him.

Former SS Gruppenführer and Reich Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller lived at the academy in the office space, occupying two rooms of about twelve square meters each. The furnishings in the rooms were spartan. Muller slept on a bunk bed for soldiers: one night downstairs, one night upstairs. It was his whim, because in Germany he was used to not spending more than one night in one place.

To my surprise, I found Genrikh Genrikhovich Yagoda, the son of our former people's commissar, who taught a special chemistry course at the academy, at my Muller's place. He was talking about something with his namesake Muller. Packed suitcases were all around. It was obvious that Papa Muller was moving somewhere.

He languidly nodded his head to me, while Yagoda, seeing me, asked:

— Vasily Lukich, why are you skipping laboratory classes?

“On a special mission,” I reported.

“Look at me,” Yagoda said sternly, “I won’t give you a credit until you hand over all the laboratory work to me.” I’m also going on a special mission right now. I’ll be back in about two weeks and ask you to eliminate all academic debts.

“Yes,” I replied in a disciplined manner and turned to Muller, “are you going somewhere, Genrikh Ivanovich?”

“I’m leaving, Lukits,” Papa Muller smiled sadly, “Comrade Stalin personally allowed me to leave for permanent residence in the State of Israel at the personal request of Golda Meir. And Herr Yagoda will accompany me to Tel Aviv and hand me over to the Israeli authorities.

I was thrown into a fever.

Are you being handed over to the Israeli authorities? I wondered.

“Mein Freund,” Müller sighed, “all definitions always suffer from inaccuracies. The Russian language is rich: they issue, transfer, return, send, send, send, send. There are other synonyms, but I forgot them. Mine Gott! Is it necessary to attach importance to such trifles? National and socialist ideas, merged into one, will sprout in any soil. Besides, I would like to have some rest in my native kibbutz.

I respectfully remained silent, not knowing what to say, and fearful of being accused of cosmopolitanism.

“You came to tell me 'Aufwiederseen', Lukit,” Müller asked.

- No, - I answered, - I need to consult with you, Genrikh Ivanovich, about the solution of a theoretical problem that I encountered in the process of working on my dissertation.

— Oh, yaa, yaa! Papa Muller brightened up. “Science in our business is zer gut!” I’m happy to help you, Lukit.

Yagoda glanced at his watch and got up.

“Excuse me, comrades,” he said, “I still have a lot to do. Heinrich,” he turned to Müller, “we leave tomorrow at 6 o'clock in the morning.

- Yawol! Muller answered and leaned towards me. “I’m all your attention, dear Lukit.

I told him the whole story as a situation, without detailing or naming any names.

What country is this happening in? asked the former head of the Gestapo.

"I mean to apply this scheme to various countries of Eastern Europe," I lied, "but first of all I would like to start, of course, with our country.

"Then," Papa Muller said, "I really don't like the word incarnation." Terribly dislike.

- With what? I was surprised.

- From this word, - explained Genrikh Ivanovich, - for a whole kilometer it carries a conspiracy and not just a conspiracy, but a Zionist conspiracy. If this were true, then I would conclude that the assassination of Comrade Stalin and a coup d'etat were being prepared.

- And how would you do it? I asked.

"I faced a similar situation even before the war," Papa Muller told me, "I immediately organized Kristallnacht — mass anti-Jewish demonstrations of the working people and took the Fuhrer to one of the islands in the Baltic Sea, where he waited out the dangerous period. The plot failed, but the war began.

He smiled wryly.

"It was good for you to organize such events," I objected, "you were a Gruppenfuehrer, the chief of the entire Gestapo, the Feljandarmerie and the Security Police. You had practically free access to the Fuhrer. And what would you do if you were just an Ershaisende Oberst?

Papa Muller laughed merrily.

- Well said! he praised me. "I positively like your modesty, Lukit. You ask what I would do in the place of this unfortunate colonel? I would shoot myself, leaving a posthumous letter addressed to my immediate superior.

- For what? I didn't understand.

"To shoot him too," Muller explained, "because in this case it is necessary to eliminate the entire vertical from top to bottom, which included the person designated in the task, including relatives and friends.

- And there is no other way out? I asked, because I did not want to shoot at all.

— Mein Goth! - Muller sighed, - all other options are much worse, believe me, Lukit. If such a tricky word as "incarnation" is used, all other options will be simply monstrous against the backdrop of the inconspicuous suicide of some colonel there. It seems to me that both sides are now aiming and maneuvering. One side, acting according to the old, proven method, will try to hide behind the Jewish backs, using the slogan borrowed from us: "The Jews are our misfortune!", which is impossible, or start a war.

— War? I gasped. - With whom?

"It doesn't matter," Papa Muller replied, "the enemy doesn't matter. The main thing is the process itself. It is necessary to wage war until the Jews, who were used as weapons, explode in the hands of those who decided to act with these weapons. At best, these wise men

will tear off his hands, but rather - his head. And the war, if it is conducted competently, can always be ended.

But maybe it's some kind of mistake? - I asked, - options with a huge error are possible.

"There can be no mistake here," Muller smiled, "these are the same forces that destroyed the Third Reich. And they act according to the old scheme: the Jews and the war. They've done away with us, now they're after you. They will do away with you if you repeat our mistakes, and do not come up with something new. I am not sure that it is possible to use the Jews as a weapon with the advent of the State of Israel. I did not have time to analyze this problem properly. It has always been very dangerous, and now it can become doubly dangerous. But in any case, I and all interested parties will watch your bold experiment with interest. Not only is he bold, but I would call him supremely daring.

I was no longer able to ask the Gruppenfuehrer questions, but only looked at him inquiringly.

"Indeed," the former chief of the Gestapo gleamed with enthusiasm with his light blue eyes, "I see a bold and innovative move in using the word "incarnation". Make it clear to the leader of the nation and the party that he will inevitably fall under the blows of his own Praetorians - what could be more effective. And note, dear Lukit, that in conspiracy theory the word "incarnation", although it is a new factor, fits well into all formulas known to us. If you came up with this, you should be awarded a master's degree without protection and opponents. This is simply brilliant.

"And in the meantime, should I shoot myself?" I reminded.

- Why does it surprise you? Muller shook his gray head. - Many brilliant theorists became the first victims of the practical implementation of their bold theories. But it is correct and scientifically flawless. Your predecessors, for example, drove the kind, naive and trusting Adolf Hitler crazy with horoscopes and reports that in a past life he was the German emperor Charles, who died of indigestion when the courtiers overfed him only with invented sausages.

"Genrikh Ivanovich," I honestly admitted, "I am very pleased that you have such a high opinion of me. However, I must disappoint you. I am not at all the author of the "incarnation" theory. In this case, I repeat, I'm just the executor of someone's plans.

— Oh, I know you, Lukic! Papa Muller screwed up his eyes. You are a cunning professional!

"A cunning professional," I objected, "I would never have come to you, Gruppenfuehrer, for advice on such a problem.

- So, you are a very, very cunning professional, - Genrikh Ivanovich did not give up, - and those who sent you, to be honest, are not worth a pfenning.

— Is that how? - I was offended, - it was they who launched the "incarnation", and you say that the price for them is a broken penny.

"They are good theoreticians," Muller explained, "but in practice, only an idiot can trust such information to a colonel. Moreover, this colonel, as far as I understand, not only does not want to shoot himself, but, on the contrary, is now piling up something resembling a private investigation. Private investigation into the system of even such an archaic service as yours is an unacceptable luxury. The consequences may be

devastating for the entire system. She is no longer able to properly respond even to her own instincts. And if so, it means that she was already paralyzed. The system, which has fallen into paralysis, is engaged in self-destruction. Here is my conclusion, Lukits, to the problem proposed by the oboe. The colonel has not yet been shot and does not want to shoot himself. This is entropy tending to infinity.

The old Gruppenfuehrer was right about something, of course. But it was impossible for his German mind to apply the problem I proposed to the realities existing in our country. He knew these realities extremely poorly, and projecting a tracing paper of the Third Reich on us was very risky.

We were not the Third Reich. We were much cooler, and the entropy tending to infinity made us unpredictable and capable of any stupidity.

However, it cannot be said that the conversation with Papa Muller did not give me anything. Gave - and a lot! The ease with which I found Khakim through the Gulag, his fake legend and much more, which clearly follows from our conversations in my kitchen, led me to a very strong suspicion that a "guide" had been slipped into me, just as a hen is slipped into a cell.

And from this very fact it followed that "incarnation" is an invention of Comrade Stalin. It is not the state security that has declared war and is preparing a conspiracy against its leader and teacher, but it is he himself who is going to strike at the organs. Or rather, it has already been inflicted, for General Belov was arrested, and possibly killed.

With the help of this mystical scheme, which Hakim presented, the entire MGB system was accused of being ready to kill Comrade Stalin. Moreover, the accusation was presented in such a form that it was absolutely impossible to parry it.

So, Comrade Stalin decided once again to put organs under the knife. I spent three previous similar campaigns in the zone with Ilyich, and now I immediately got to the front line of the deadly struggle.

On reflection, it turned out that Stalin did nothing else all his life, as he fought with his own security agencies and, to his credit, he won the first two rounds, and drew the third round - the Great Patriotic War - albeit with great difficulty.

Now the fourth round of the deadly fight began. But the leader grew old, and the "organs" remained young and bold, since almost no one grows old in our work.  
allowed.

Later, smart people explained to me that my scheme was somewhat simplified. In Comrade Stalin, they said, two principles were always fighting: the constructive and the destructive. Everything that he created with one hand, he destroyed with the other. Having created an excellent system of agriculture in the country, he suddenly began the almost total destruction of the peasants. Having created magnificent armed forces, he cut them out himself. The same thing happened to our glorious organs. As soon as they gained strength, they were immediately destroyed. There is no simple answer to these questions, but it seems to me personally that the inconsistency between the Stalinist doubles, who before the war worked as watchmen - every three days - and each considered himself the smartest, played a huge role here. And therefore, stepping on the "watch", they immediately destroyed everything that had been done the day before by their replacements. Therefore, our country was engulfed by an orgy of self-destruction.

I remember that Ilyich laughed at this and said: "What, Comrade Vasily, is the liquidation of classes and the creation of a classless society? This, my friend, means the self-liquidation of society itself as such. And they, fools, do not understand that it is impossible



liquidate classes without destroying the state itself!" "But you, Vladimir Ilyich," I tried to object, "you yourself suggested to them the idea of eliminating classes first, and then the state by constantly strengthening it." He just giggled merrily, rubbed his hands and said: "And you must admit, comrade Vasily, that this is a great idea!". I sincerely agreed.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to explain all this to the aging Gruppenführer Müller. He was brought up on extremely straightforward slogans such as "Joy through strength" or "One Reich, one leader, one people!" To implement the last slogan, it was enough for them to eliminate 1% of their people (Jews), and for this we had to shoot two-thirds of the country's population. True, everyone knew that there were no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not take, but it was already clear that the whole process dragged on to indecent and became practically uncontrollable. And in the impending chaos, where our heads were again at stake, in Stalin's inner circle there could well be someone who could fulfill the main whim of the soul of Comrade Stalin, who loved to leave the occupied body through a bullet hole.

So Hakim, whoever sent him, was right!

In any case, a conversation with Papa Muller made me understand that in such a development of events, in the words of Comrade Engels, "nothing is impossible."

"Gruppenführer," I said to him in parting, "I wish you a good rest in your historical homeland. Try to publish your "conspiracy theory" there, at least in Hebrew. It will serve as a manual for many future generations of our colleagues. The simplicity with which, according to your theory, any state laments, puts you, dear Genrikh Ivanovich, in the ranks of the world's great thinkers. Some raise the cry "Beat the Jews!", others, in contrast, start a war, and everything flies into a cesspool!

"And Israel is reborn," Muller solemnly raised his finger.

"I hope that this is a special case," I objected, "but this does not in the least detract from the significance of your discovery.

"If someone repeated your words, Lukit, at least at my funeral," Papa Muller shed tears. Farewell, mein kinder. You were the most capable of my students.

I kissed the old man on his gray stubble and hurried back to my apartment to clarify some details with Hakim. Although I strongly doubted that I would find him at home yet. 9

And so it happened. The hair with which I sealed my apartment when I left was in place, but Khakim was not in the apartment. The handcuffs I used to chain him to the drainpipe in the bathroom hung on a stud in the hallway next to the spare apartment keys. The folding bed is gone too.

But most of all I was struck by the picture that I saw in the kitchen. On the kitchen table was an empty bottle of Moskovskaya vodka and two empty glasses, in one of which a fly was writhing in its death throes.

On the table lay a piece of paper on which was drawn a diagram I did not understand, provided with comments either in Chinese, or in Japanese, or in Tibetan. In any case, for me it was a "Chinese letter". Some of the comments were made by Hakim's hand, but some were done in a handwriting that was completely unfamiliar to me, moreover, in red pencil. Comments in red pencil are always made by bosses. So, while I was not at home, Hakim was visited by some of his bosses. They discussed something, and then fled.

The most striking thing about this whole story was that they drank vodka at the same time, emptying a whole bottle of Moskovskaya. And the scoundrel Hakim assured me that he does not take alcohol into his mouth, since his soul has a whim to leave the body forever only in case of severe alcohol poisoning.

And at the same time, they also stole a folding bed from me, which, roughly speaking, was government-owned, since I myself once dragged it away when moving to this apartment from our hostel. True, with the knowledge of the commandant.

I began to look at the diagram drawn on the sheet, thinking about whether to attach this piece of paper as an appendix to Hakim's report in Tibetan or not.

The scheme seemed very familiar to me for some reason. I've definitely seen her somewhere before, more than once. Having rattled my brains a bit, I completely unexpectedly realized even for myself that this was a traffic pattern from the Bolshoi Theater on the Garden Ring to our building on the Lubyanka.

Someone was explaining to someone how to get to the main building of the MGB. Someone to Hakim or Hakim to someone? And for what? And why is it in my kitchen?

Of course, I was not able to answer all these stupid questions, and therefore I decided to go to the Lubyanka and try to catch Hakim there along with his friend. And then hand over both to the special department for a thorough identification of the identity and the involvement of Colonel Lukyanov as a witness.

Here I had to admit to myself that I got excited. How and to whom will I explain all this? I received the task to find out all the reincarnations of Comrade Stalin from General Belov, who had already been arrested. Who should I refer to? I found myself in the most stupid position, and, apparently, someone already understands this, since even Ilyich himself did not allow such jokes about me.

But there is an old principle - never run away from danger, but always go towards it. That is why I decided to go to the Lubyanka anyway, in order to at least conduct some reconnaissance there.

Which is what I did. My plan was this: to find out, if possible, what happened to General Belov and try to catch Hakim himself or his friend, or both of them. I began to strongly suspect that Khakim's friend was the one who slept on my cot while Khakim himself was sitting in the kitchen. Or vice versa. But this is fundamental

didn't matter.

If need be, I'll search the basement as well. Fortunately, I have known him well since the time when, on the orders of Felix Edmundovich himself, we confiscated the building of the Rossiya insurance company. Dzerzhinsky then really liked the cells of the underground prison, built, according to rumors, back in the time of Ivan the Terrible, and he really wanted this prison to work again. But nothing happened, because before the prisoners in this prison, the guards began to die - Germans, Latvians and other internationalists who were completely unaccustomed to

similar working conditions. I had to urgently build an inner prison. I knew Vanya Abramov, the head of our detention center, well and hoped with his help to rummage through the empty cells, where Khakim and his friend could have settled down.

I was a little afraid that I would be arrested as soon as I appeared at the headquarters, but nothing of the sort happened. Moreover, the commandant of the Lubyanka, Lieutenant Colonel Filya Bobkov, who was standing at the main checkpoint, almost started to kiss me when he saw me:

"Lukic," he yelled, "how glad I am to see you!" You and your academy completely forgot us. Why the hell did this academy surrender to you? Do you want to become literate?

"The enemy is getting smarter, and we must get smarter," I replied, carefully releasing my hand from his bearish palm.

"That's right," Filya agreed and added, "come in and get new, chrome boots." We've set aside a couple for you.

Thanking him, I went up to the third floor and walked along the red carpet, considering a plan for further actions, when a favorable fate sent Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov himself to meet me.

With the most frustrated look, he wandered along the corridor, holding a piece of paper in his limply lowered hand.

"I'm lost, Lukich," he whispered to me, "I don't know what to do."

- What's happened? I asked with participation in my voice.

"This general," exclaimed Zyuganov, "is a scumbag! It was ordered to take and interrogate to the fullest extent on the subject of noble origin. I hit him once. Not much punched, Lukich, the word of the Chekist! And he took it and died.

And Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov sobbed on my chest.

It looked ridiculous. Two senior officers of the MGB stood in the middle of the main corridor of the Directorate, and one sobbed into the chest of the other.

"Well, why are you roaring like a woman," I growled rudely, "the general died, so he died. We'll all die! Are you a man or not?

For some reason it seemed to me that Zyuganov felt sorry for the general.

But it turned out not quite so. Before Zyuganov had time to report to the chief about this incident, which at that time was completely ordinary, the poor lieutenant colonel was immediately charged with the deliberate murder of the person under investigation so that he did not have time to testify. Moreover, nowhere was it recorded that the defendant refused to testify. Zyuganov was accused of conspiring with a person under investigation in order to conceal the truth from justice. He was ordered to write an explanatory note addressed to the Minister himself, Colonel-General Abakumov, and to personally appear before him to clarify the circumstances of the case.

I met Zyuganov just at the moment when he was walking on the carpet to the minister with his explanatory note. He could be understood, because they could have been carried out of Abakumov's office with a bullet through his head.

I have known Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov since pre-war times. At one time he was a courier in my team, providing communication between my special zone and the Lubyanka. Whom I guarded in the zone - then (yes, I think, even now) he was not supposed to know, but he was listed as my subordinate. He was a good guy, an athlete, and, to be honest, I treated him very well. It was I who wrote him a testimonial, after which he went uphill. Since then, our paths have diverged, and we only accidentally collided in the corridors, each time exchanging handshakes and on-duty phrases about service and health, despite the difference in ranks.

A thought flashed through my mind, should I go to Abakumov and have a frank conversation with him. After all, if what Hakim said is at least to some extent true, then the first of the heads that is destined to roll at the feet of Comrade Stalin should be precisely the head of Abakumov. He must understand this better than others.

Having made such a decision, I took the weeping Zyuganov by the arm and together with him entered the minister's reception room, where Colonel Seleznev, one of Abakumov's adjutants, was solemnly seated.

— Aha! he said at the sight of Zyuganov. - It's too late to cry! Come into the office, while I order the coffin.

Zyuganov sobbed loudly and disappeared through the door.

“And what do you need, Lukich?” he asked me. “You'd better stay out of here. Fierce today, like a lion. I returned from Comrade Stalin in the morning.

“Gena,” I asked him, “I need to see Viktor Semyonovich for an appointment. Set this up for me.

— On what question? he asked.

“Personal,” I lied.

- On a personal issue, the minister does not receive anyone, - Seleznev said, - on personal issues, the commandant receives in the basement.

I remembered that Filya Bobkov invited me to come to him for boots and shivered.

- What are you doing now? Seleznev interrupted my thoughts.

“I study at the academy,” I replied.

“And study,” Seleznev advised, “until you get spanked.”

“Lukic, believe me, I don't wish you harm,” he whispered, leaning over the table, “do you know how we live today? Live today, not tomorrow! Do not appear in front of Viktor Semyonovich.

At that moment, the door of the ministerial office, equipped with a special soundproofing system, opened with a bang, and Lieutenant Colonel Zyuganov flew out of the office, accompanied by the bass of the ministerial roar: “Go on ..!”

Zyuganov's view was terrible. One shoulder strap was torn off with meat, on the second one asterisk was torn off, and a lantern was poured under the eye in a red-violet color. But a happy smile shone on the lieutenant colonel's face.

- Degraded to the majors! he said happily. - Allowed to atone for the same position!

Here, in the doorway, in all the glory of his sazhen growth, the minister himself suddenly appeared.

— Seleznyov! he barked. Ran the whole office. Go, open the windows, ventilate! It will happen again, you will lick all the toilets in my language management!

At the sight of me, the Minister's eyebrow raised in surprise.

— Lukic? Abakumov asked with some incomprehensible wariness in his voice. - Why are you here?

“I wanted to make an appointment with you, Comrade General Commissar,” I said, “

because I have to report to you on a matter of national importance.

The minister hesitated for a moment, then, clearly overpowering himself, said:

- OK. We went to the rest room. And then it is impossible to enter the office after a conversation with Zyuganov.

Holding his nose with his hand, Abakumov went through the office, where Seleznev had already opened the windows. I followed him, but I did not feel any smell, apparently from tension.

Stalin from the portrait, painted in full growth and with all the orders, looked sideways at me with an ironic grin when I followed Abakumov into the next room, intended for the minister's rest.

This room turned out to be no smaller than the study itself, but unlike the latter, it was rather tackily furnished. Most of all, the huge bed with a crumpled bedspread and a mountain of a wide variety of pillows was striking. At the back stood an ancient mahogany sideboard, adorned with carved nymphs and Vestals, who covered their nakedness with clusters of grapes. The sideboard was piled with bottles and glasses of various sizes. On a small coffee table with gilded carved legs was a bronze sculptural composition depicting a plot from Greek mythology. With whom Abakumov communicated all these years, that he spoiled his taste so much, I still don't know. He left no memoirs.

- Will you drink? the minister asked.

"As you wish," I answered evasively.

"I'll order," Abakumov said, taking out two not very clean glasses and pouring some brown liquid from a square bottle, on the sticker of which Gothic letters were predatory green.

— What is it? I asked.

"Drink, don't talk," the minister muttered displeasedly, raising his glass, "otherwise you're used to drinking vodka with Belov."

He raised his glass even higher.

Let's remember Belov! he announced with a sigh. "I never thought he would end up like this."

Mentioned.

The fact that the minister began the conversation with a memorial toast in honor of General Belov, who was killed by Zyuganov, did not bode well for me. I already began to regret that I myself climbed into this cave. In our business, it has always been very important not to fall into the hands of the authorities.

But the minister suddenly changed the subject.

What have you been whispering to the fascist all day today? - he asked.

- Are you talking about Genrikh Ivanovich, Comrade General Commissar? - question to question I answered.

"Don't pretend to be a fool," Abakumov gritted, "will you have another drink before you die?"

When the authorities carry this, the best thing is to pretend that you did not hear it or did not take it personally.

— He is the head of my dissertation, — I preferred to answer Abakumov's previous question, — the supervisor.

— Are you writing your dissertation, Lukich? - he was amazed and even put the glass on the table. I expected that he would now proclaim a toast to the repose of my soul.

- Writing! I answered with some challenge.

- What is the topic? the Minister asked, pouring into my glass.

"Conspiracy theory," I said.

— From the evil eye? joked Abakumov.

- Like that, - I answered him in tone and, seizing the initiative, raised my glass, - your health, Viktor Semyonovich, Comrade Colonel General!

We drank.

Abakumov went up to the gramophone standing among the bottles, twisted the knob and put the record on.

"The expanse is blue, the land is astern. The flag of our native land proudly flies over us!"[4] yelled the gramophone.

"Do you know, Lukich, what Comrade Stalin told me last night?" Returning to his seat, the minister leaned over to my ear. - You have no idea, you moron, what you have done with Belov, rest in peace to him!

"Our glorious victories are remembered by insidious enemies!" the gramophone blared.

"Comrade Stalin," Abakumov continued to whisper, "received information that we Chekists want to kill him. He, of course, did not believe it, but you and Belov confirmed this. It's good that Belov did not have time to give any evidence. What if he could? Lukich, I didn't expect this from you.

"Because we carry the name of Stalin in our hearts!" - the gramophone bellowed for the last time and fell silent

"I love this song," Abakumov said deliberately loudly, going up to the gramophone and turning the record over. He twisted the knob and the music began again.

- Trophy, - the minister boasted, - do you hear how he screams? Ours sound very different.

"Stalin is our military glory! - the gramophone rumbled, - Stalin - our youth is a flight!

- Who gave Belov this task? Abakumov asked, lowering his voice. - This task is to check the movement of Comrade Stalin's soul?

"As far as I understand," I answered honestly, "in the secretariat of the Central Committee. Even in the Presidium of the Central Committee. He did not particularly expand on this topic, and, as you understand, I did not ask.

Did he name any names? At the same time, the Minister's forehead touched my forehead. — Tell the truth, Lukich!

"He did," I admitted, resting my forehead on the minister's forehead, "he called Suslov's name.

Abakumov leaned back in his chair. His always ruddy cheeks faded. For about a minute the minister

sat with his eyes closed.

"With songs, fighting and winning, our people are marching for Stalin!" roared the trophy gramophone.

- So, Suslov, - the minister opened his eyes, - this is Khrushchev's creature. My head is swimming, Lukic. Khrushchev is a man of Lavrenty Pavlovich surrounded by Malenkov. Malenkov is now the closest person, certified by the confidence of Comrade Stalin. And Suslov is the coordinator of all their actions. And he, over Lavrenty Pavlovich's head and mine, passes Belov a similar task, substituting us under the axe.

Abakumov got up and turned the record over again.

"You are writing dissertations, Lukich," he continued, "but you don't understand simple things.

"There is no other homeland like this in the world," the gramophone boomed.

- On the one hand, we received an order to kill Comrade Stalin, and on the other hand, they immediately gave us up to insure our own asses just in case.

"We are moving forward and will not turn off the path, because we carry Stalin's name in our hearts!" the gramophone kept hammering nails into my head.

- What to do? I whispered, looking at Viktor Semyonovich with genuine horror.

- What to do? Abakumov asked. - Let's try the old scheme that you and Muller developed. Let's hide behind a smoke screen. War is the bare minimum for now. Moreover, such a war, which would go from bad to worse, but would not threaten with a special catastrophe.

"But after all, Comrade Stalin himself ordered the blockade of West Berlin to be lifted," I reminded him, "what kind of war are you talking about, Comrade General Commissar?"

"Not about the third world war, of course," the minister smiled wryly, "something smaller. Then it will be possible to give in to the Jews. It's a good thing too. Otherwise, how can we carry out the order, Lukic?"

- What order? I murmured, beginning to guess what Abakumov was getting at. - What order are you going to carry out, Comrade Colonel General?

"Let us illuminate, like sunlight, the banner of your victories!" boomed the gramophone.

"Don't pretend to be a fool," Abakumov said harshly, "you just asked 'What to do?'. There's nothing to be done, Lukic. If such a booze has gone - cut the last cucumber! Since these wise men decided to put us under the knife with these "incarnations", then we have no choice but to become an instrument of fate. That is, the only way out for us is to fulfill the destiny.

Despite the roar of the gramophone, I clearly heard solemn notes in the minister's voice.

"And you must do it," continued the minister, "you must, Lukich!"

I choked and coughed. Luckily, at that moment the phone rang. Abakumov picked up the phone.

"Yes," he said gloomily, "I will.

"The commandant called," Abakumov turned to me, "there he left you a pair of chrome boots." Where is your certificate? At our place or at the academy?

"Academy," I reported.

"So why do you need our boots?" the minister asked. - Or is a pair good, but two is better? However, as you know. I don't feel sorry for your boots at all, Lukic. But greed always destroys fraerov.

"Thank you, Viktor Semyonovich," I said sincerely.

To tell the truth, I did not intend to go to Philip Bobkov for the boots, which he announced to me right on the watch. This technique: "Come to me, get boots", has been practiced since the time when the Cheka was in Petrograd on Gorokhovaya, 2. Few people remember what a pair of boots was for any person in those and many subsequent years. No one could resist such a lure. He went for boots and received a bullet in the back of the head. Everyone knew this and everyone, nevertheless, was bought, forgetting that it was not the commandant who was in charge of issuing boots. And those - who did not care, with those, if you want - believe it, if you want - no, nothing happened. As far as I know, this method was last used in Leningrad in November 1958. Before the holidays.

Even when I entered the Directorate, I already understood that Bobkov had received an order to slap me. The fight has begun!

— Do you understand me, Lukic? Abakumov insisted.

"Not quite," he confessed honestly, "do you want me to follow orders?" But how? I do not enter the immediate, or even the distant environment of Comrade Stalin. I don't even have a pass to go to the Kremlin to admire the Tsar Cannon.

"Lukich," Abakumov answered, "I understand that in your heart you don't want to carry out this order at all. That's why you carry all this nonsense about passes to the Kremlin. What kind of passes can there be? To be honest, I don't want it anymore. You still have a chance to survive in this case, but I don't. Belov is already dead, I could be next. But there is no choice. Do I really have to explain this to a person like you, Lukic? There is a war going on. Consider that everyone has already died in this war: Dzerzhinsky, Menzhinsky, Yagoda, Yezhov. And we will perish with Lavrenty Pavlovich. I can feel it. But you, Lukich, if you survived from the time of Dzerzhinsky, then you have a good chance to survive now. There are people with a happy military fate. As during the explosion: two thousand people died, but one survived. Therefore, you must carry out this order, Lukic. There's just no one else.

But who gave this order? I almost yelled. - Who could give the order that we received in the form of "incarnation"?

"This is an order," the Minister replied. Only one person could give. Comrade Stalin himself.

- For what? Forgetting about servility, I grabbed Abakumov by the belt and pulled him to me. Why would he give such an order?

Abakumov tore my hand away from his belt by force.

"To kill us all," he croaked, "firstly, for intent, and secondly, for disobeying an order. But here he miscalculated. We will carry out the order of the leader. Lukic! We can no longer do it! 10

— What are you talking about, Lukic? I asked dazedly, having previously listened to the veteran's story with an open mouth. — What are you? Killed Comrade Stalin? You told me you never saw him!



"In order to kill someone, it is not at all necessary to meet with him," Vasily Lukich laughed, "but calm down. Of course, I didn't kill him. I have never killed anyone in my life. Stalin was killed by Colonel Zyuganov.

- How? I jumped up in my chair.

"It's very simple," Lukich shrugged his shoulders, "he shot him. As predicted by Hakim. By the way, I can introduce you to him. He will tell you the details. Likes to talk.

"Wait," I asked, trying to put my thoughts in order, "wait, Lukich, let me catch my breath." Do you have analgin?

"I don't use it," Lukich waved it off, "I can pour half a glass of cognac for you so that the blood vessels expand." What are you pissed off about? What surprised you so much? What were you waiting for? That we will cling to the soul of Comrade Stalin and will not let it leave his body?

- Well, how did you do it? I groaned. "You talk about it so simply, Lukich. Colonel Zyuganov took and shot Comrade Stalin. How did he get there?

"You are a historian," said Lukich mockingly, "you must know how further events developed. Before we had time to celebrate the leader's seventieth birthday, the war in Korea began. Do you even know about this?

"This distracted attention for a while, and on the sly they crushed the Leningrad party organization, setting Malenkov on it," Lukich continued, changing the tone of his narrative to that of a mentor-professor, "and while Stalin dealt with the vile Leningrad separatist traitors, Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov did the first attempt to inflict a crushing blow on the leader.

- But it was not there! - Lukich shook his finger instructively at someone, - Viktor Semyonovich, God rest him, the passion-bearer, made a big mistake. It consisted in the fact that he never wanted to believe in the main whim of the soul to always leave the body in the same way, considering all this to be a woman's fairy tales. He developed his plan for the destruction of Comrade Stalin with the help of his personal doctors, who, as is clear to every schoolchild, were also part of the state security system and, therefore, were subordinate to Lavrenty Pavlovich and Viktor Semyonovich. However, if the soul loves to leave the body through a bullet hole, it will never do so through a fake heart attack or a medically engineered stroke. Needless to say, all the doctors got burned and were arrested. And, of course, Abakumov himself was the first to be handed over, as he foresaw. Viktor Semyonovich was arrested right in his office by a special task force led by Kobulov.

"Wait," I asked Lukich, "wasn't Abakumov arrested along with Beria after Stalin's death on Nikita's orders?"

— Historian! - Putting the maximum possible contempt into this word, Vasily Lukich answered, - Viktor Semyonovich Abakumov was arrested by order of Stalin in 1951, and shot by order of Khrushchev already in 1956!

— So how? - I didn't understand, - Stalin imprisoned him, and Khrushchev shot him? After all, he had to be considered a "victim of Stalinist repressions," which automatically entailed his release, reinstatement in the party, the return of ranks, orders, and so on. And here it turns out that Khrushchev did what Stalin did not have time to do?

"Here you hit the nail on the head," agreed Lukich, "but this is a story of its own. We'll get closer to her. And after the arrest of Abakumov and the Kremlin doctors, who were overwhelmingly Jews, the most powerful anti-Semitic campaign in our country began.

And during such campaigns, you can already do whatever you want. Under the cries of "Beat the cosmopolitan Jews!" They defeated the inner office and personal guards of Comrade Stalin. As a result, he was left alone: no doctors, no guards, no apparatus. Even Poskrebyshev and Vlasik ended up in prison. Take him with your bare hands! So he came to somehow Zyuganov shot him. It happened on February 28, 1953, and not on March 5, as officially announced the death of the leader.

Why Zyuganov? Yes, because he was instructed to do this, promising to restore the rank and a new apartment. He had five children. Anyone else could have been in his place. I, for example. But I don't like things like that. It can be said, cautiously avoided. However, no one insisted.

- And what happened to Hakim then? I asked. - Have you met yet?

"There was an interesting story with Khakim," Lukich began smiling, "that paper that he wrote in Tibetan in my kitchen, we then sent to Comrade Stalin's secretariat shortly before the celebration of the leader's seventieth birthday. I don't know who in the apparatus translated it into Russian, but it turned out that this was a solemn ode, glorifying not Comrade Stalin himself, but his beautiful and courageous soul. They say that the leader liked it so much that he ordered that the author be given the Stalin Prize of the first degree.

And Hakim bought into it. It was useful to receive this award along with a gold medal. And from there they were taken straight to the banquet, which was attended by Comrade Stalin himself. The leader took two glasses of vodka, went up to Hakim and said: "I want to drink to the health of the great poet."

It happened exactly one of those situations that Hakim was always afraid of, when it is impossible to refuse alcohol. He drank and immediately gave up. He was dragged right out of the hall and immediately cremated right in the Kremlin crematorium.

"But he drank vodka in your kitchen," I reminded him, "and nothing.

"No," Lukich shook his head, "I thought about it and came to the conclusion that there was a staging in my kitchen. From hooligan motives, speaking the official language. For the same reasons, a cot was stolen. Well, think for yourself, why does Hakim need a folding bed?

"I don't know," I sighed, "you talk about all this, Lukich, so casually that it's even disgusting." They took and shot Stalin for a new apartment.

"That's how you perceive it," Vasily Lukich objected, "because for you, that the Korean War, that the Leningrad case, that the case of doctors, that the arrest of Abakumov are all empty words. You can't even imagine how many of our employees died in all these cases. But this is not the most important thing. It seemed to me that you are a savvy, literate guy and think of what you need yourself. But if you, excuse me, are so stupid, then I will tell you this tale so that you don't think that you just lost time listening to it.

"It seems to you," continued the veteran, "that it was all so simple. If they wanted it, they started the war in Korea, if they wanted it, they crushed the Zhdanovites in St. Petersburg, if they wanted it, they imprisoned the Kremlin doctors and threw their minister on nails? No. There is little that depended on our desire. Everything was the iron will of Stalin himself. Even in my own death...

I would not mind being on this and finish, because the head was already breaking from the cunning calculations of the old Chekist. But, remembering how much effort I had to spend to talk this reinforced concrete monument to the memory of an era of unprecedented interest in our country, I decided to listen to the end. And let Lukich decide for himself when that end will come.

"To listen to you," I gave vent to my irritation, "it turns out that Iosif Vissarionovich just took and committed suicide?"

— In-in, — Lukich perked up, — you are almost right. Only he was still one of the seminarians - he received a secondary theological education. They probably managed to drum it into him that suicide is a mortal sin.

- Something I do not understand, what are you talking about, Vasily Lukich? I muttered, completely crushed by the argument of the NKVD veteran.

- What is not clear here? Vasily Lukich was sincerely surprised. - Comrade Stalin, memory eternal to him, was always interested in mystical problems. Multi-colored magicians like Gurzhiev and Messing were always spinning around him. And he knew about his soul long before Hakim appeared. I want to say that he had long known the main whim of his soul. He knew that the bullet would come from the Chekists. That's why he always destroyed us. And having lived to the age of 70, he decided to play a similar combination, informing us of the intended mission, and at the same time check whether the information about the whim of his soul received from other sources is confirmed or not.

It seems to me that this was his mistake, since the MGB kept all the "guides" under control and this information could not remain unconfirmed. Upon learning of this, Comrade Stalin realized that he was doomed. Here he began to get nervous and make mistakes. He shouldn't have killed Belov and drunk vodka with Hakim.

When three of his doubles were localized one by one, he realized that he had lost. He was very offended. After all, it was he himself who turned the MGB into a giant monster, he created us, as medieval sorcerers created the demons of death, becoming their first victims. But Stalin was not a medieval sorcerer. He was the great leader of all nations. Since the demon he created by the will of fate was supposed to kill him, then he decided to destroy this monster. He left an order-testament, which Matryona Ivanovna personally handed over to Khrushchev, Malenkov and Zhukov. It was an order for revenge for his murder.

And what happened next, you know. The full power of the army was brought down on us. The operation was led by five marshals led by Zhukov. Beria, Merkulov, both Kobulovs, Dekanozov, Tsanava and many others were captured and shot without trial or investigation. Do not count everyone. And Abakumov was shot in 1956, because he was on the lists compiled personally by Stalin forty-eight hours before receiving the bullet.

"But," I tried to object, "but what about the 20th Congress, Khrushchev's secret speech, de-Stalinization, rehabilitation, and so on?"

- This happened only three years after the death of the leader, - answered Lukich, - and in 1953, this whole Khrushchev-Malenkov company was simply not able to disobey Stalin's order, even given from the other world. You can't even imagine what STALIN'S ORDER is, given to a handful of his close associates! It was only later that they gradually began to emerge from their stupor, cowardly looking around, and throughout the whole of 1953, Stalin still completely remained alive for them. I'll even tell you more. Have you ever asked yourself the question: why was it that Stalin's marshals such as Zhukov, Konev, Sokolovsky, Malinovsky and others acted with such swiftness and decisiveness during the 1954 coup? Why did people like Lavrenty Pavlovich and his entourage, having in their hands such a powerful punitive machine that, through a system of special departments, could paralyze the entire army in two minutes and liquidate these same marshals, suddenly so absurdly allowed themselves to be seized and exterminated? Yes, because both of them were presented with Stalin's order! That's the way it is, brother!

"Well, all right," I said, "why, then, did Colonel Zyuganov survive and not be punished?"

- First, it was not in the lists. Comrade Stalin understood that Zyuganov was just an instrument of fate," Lukich explained, "and secondly, he was punished. He received a reprimand with the entry, in addition, he was fired from the bodies and transferred to party work.

— Well, and you yourself, Lukich, how did you get away? I didn't let up. How did you manage to get out of this mess?

"Fortunately, I was not in Moscow then," Vasily Lukich smiled with one of his predatory smiles, "I transported Kim Il Sung to Pyongyang.

— Staged? I hiccupped. - Where did you send him from?

"From the Lubyanka," answered Lukich, "from the inner prison." Comrade Stalin ordered that he be imprisoned in 1951 together with Abakumov.

- For what? I yelled. Why was Kim Il Sung imprisoned?

"He was entitled to a lot," Lukich answered evasively, "but officially for the fact that, when filling out the questionnaire, he wrote "Korean" in the "nationality" column, when in reality he was a Chukchi. Comrade Stalin was very strict about such questions. For him, the questionnaire was a sacred document. I was later told that in 1952 he asked for my personal file three times. I don't know what for. But since it indicated that I had been shot, he returned it three times with a note: "Young people!"

"So you can say you're lucky?" I asked.

"Relatively," agreed Lukich, "but they kicked me out of the organs anyway. After the fifty-fifth year, I can be said to have become the first private detective "on delicate matters of national importance." But that is another story.

Lukich paused, sighed, and added:

"But it's not entirely clear to me in this case either. Why did they use the word "incarnation"? This is not our word. How it immediately hit Papa Muller in the ears! Has it been planted from abroad in order to once again test the strength of our entire socialist system?

## LENIN JUBILEE

### 1

I drew attention to the fact that Vasily Lukich constantly wears on his jacket a medal issued for the centenary of the birth of Lenin in 1970. These medals that year were awarded en masse to everyone. From my point of view, this medal was a masterpiece of bad taste. Lurid, made of aluminum alloy stylized as gold, on a red ribbon - it vaguely resembled the old-fashioned badges of cabbies. Few people wear it now. Even veterans of the party prefer different exotic badges with a claim to participation in the Second World War than the jubilee Lenin medal, from which a mile away shows a fake.

Somehow I could not resist and asked Vasily Lukich why he liked this medal so much that he constantly drags it around, shifting it from one jacket to another.

So she's golden! replied the old Chekist.

— What are you, Lukich! - I was amazed, - what kind of gold is this? Do you really believe it's made of gold?

Instead of answering, Vasily Lukich turned the medal over and showed me the 96th hallmark stamped on its reverse side.

Then he took it off his lapel and handed it to me so that I could feel the full weight of the noblest of metals.

I was defeated, trampled and smeared.

In addition to the sample, a personal three-digit number was stamped on the reverse side of the medal, the emblem of the Chekist "shield and sword" flaunted, and there was an inscription that the owner of this medal enjoys the same benefits as the holder of the Order of Glory of all three degrees.

"Lukich," I asked, recovering my senses and stuttering, "is that a special medal?"

- Raise it higher, - the veteran laughed, - an absolutely fantastic story is connected with it. I don't even know how to tell you. You find it difficult to understand even simpler things.

I was offended:

- When you talk about your service, I sometimes cannot understand where is the truth and where is your fiction or fantasy. In this case, of course, I can not understand anything. But it's not because I'm so stupid, but because ...

"...That you didn't live at that time," Vasily Lukich finished for me, "and the time, I can tell you, was really fantastic. How then they sang: "We were born to make a fairy tale come true!" And as I already told you, all the songs of that time contained a diametrically opposite meaning. And in the end, the true story was turned into such a fairy tale that the most famous horror film writers of today could not even dream of. Here, listen. It happened somewhere shortly before the celebration of the centenary of the birth of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. I somehow climb into my mailbox and take out a summons from there. They invite me to Lubyanka in connection with the rehabilitation as an innocent victim of repression during the years of the personality cult. I immediately noticed that the summons was not addressed to me personally, since the surname is written in the plural. Like the whole family. During those years I worked at the university ...

- In the University? I wonder. - By whom?

"I'll tell you later," Lukich involuntarily frowns, "don't interrupt, otherwise I'll lose my mind and won't tell anything.

"Excuse me, Vasily Lukich," I mutter in embarrassment, "I won't do it again.

- So, - continues Vasily Lukich, - I come to the KGB reception, hand over the summons. They tell me: "Sit down for a while. Now an employee will come out, he will take care of you."

I sit and think: "It seems that I have not been subjected to any repression under any authorities. What is happening? Did they confuse me with someone else?"

Then an employee comes out - young, red-faced, broad-shouldered, in a fashionable suit. In my hands is my agenda, under my arm a thick folder with the inscription "NKVD of the USSR", and below "Personal File No. " and a bunch of all sorts of purple and black stamps.

The employee nodded his head to me and said: "Come with me."

We went into some office, he seated me at the table, puts a folder in front of me and orders: "Get acquainted with the case." And he sits down at another table, takes some kind of journal and writes down something from my agenda.

I look - this is my personal business. Or rather, a part of it, because the cover says: "Started: July 4, 1919. Finished: March 18, 1941. And below is the stamp: "Executed on March 18, 1941", and under it is a very fresh seal: "Rehabilitated due to the lack of corpus delicti on October 19, 1969."

"  
Wow, think pies! What does all this mean?"

I open a case and immediately stumble upon the "Memorandum of Understanding". The handwriting is painfully familiar. I run my eyes. Fathers! So this is Vladimir Ilyich himself! Exactly. And his signature is Ulyanov (Lenin). True, without a date, but with a number. For the rest of my life I remembered: "Memorandum No. 18. Top secret." In it, the leader of the world proletariat characterizes me as a degenerate and, noting the huge amount of secret information that I have accumulated, invites the "comrades" to take immediate preventive measures to avoid potential leakage of this very secret information.

The ink is black. We had purple ink in the zone all the time. Only once I received black ones in stock. It was at the end of the thirty-ninth year.

"Wow, I think. Here's the ego number! Top class!"

Then I look: the order for my execution, already signed by Vsevolod Merkulov: "According to the decision of the NKGB board and on the basis of "Memorandum No. 18". Then everything is in order: an act signed by Ivan Fomich - the commandant - that I was shot and a receipt from the director of the cemetery, who accepted the corpse for burial.

"Well," I think, "I'll ask Ivan Fomich what kind of jokes they are." He lives with me now in the same house, only in a different entrance. We often slaughter a goat in the yard in the summer.

But what especially killed me was the fact that I was shot on March 18, 1941, on the basis of Ilyich's memo, (the date from Ivan Fomich's receipt), that for sixteen years, while under my protection, Vladimir Ilyich managed to write eighteen memos about me. That is, one every year, and in 1939 - as many as three. The fact that he wrote them, okay. But how did he convey them?

I remembered his words: "Conspiracy, Vasily Lukich, and again conspiracy!". Indeed, I have never known such a master of conspiracy.

And the employee, who copied something from my agenda into the registration journal, asks me: "Who are you related to the deceased?"

"To whom?" — I did not understand, continuing to study the case and admire.

"Rehabilitated, that is," the employee prompts, "who are you to him?"

"I didn't understand," I say, "what does it mean who I belong to?"

From my stupidity, the employee even became nervous. "What is not clear here? - he waves my summons, - I seem to clearly ask: in what family ties are you in relation to the innocently repressed? Son? Brother?"

"I don't belong to anyone," I confess.

"How is that? - the employee jumped up in his chair. "On what basis then..."

"So this is me," I say, smiling and continuing to read the memos of the leader of the world proletariat. I noticed that there are no dates under any of them.

The employee, apparently, for a moment, as they say, his breath stopped in his goiter. He went with red spots and in a kind of strict teacher's tone reprimands me:

"Stop making jokes to me here. Don't forget where you are. I'm not playing games with you here. This is a serious matter, I'm arranging a circus for me here. Not even solid at your age. Once again I ask: to what degree of relationship are you with the rehabilitated, with the condemned to the highest measure?

"It is I myself," I repeat, "and there is no need for me to lecture. More brat!"

This is why I began to swear, in order to gain time and have time to read the documents of the case, before he took it from me.

- Don't forget where you are? I mimic him as I continue flipping through the file. - Yes, I have been here since the time of Menzhinsky. When you, dear comrade, were not even in the project. When your mom and dad were still under themselves!

Then he went red spots, jumps up from the table and does not speak, but hoots somehow (his throat must have intercepted):

"Your passport! Passport, I say, present! Now I'll issue fifteen days for hooliganism and I won't look at your years!"

"Please," I answer and hand him my passport, continuing to leaf through the file. Well, Vladimir Ilyich! But well done too! Real leader! So who was guarding whom in the zone: I him or he me?

Meanwhile, my interlocutor leafs through the passport and is even more covered with red spots. Then he came to his senses, shast - and snatched the case from me, put it on his table.

"Sorry. - I am indignant, - but I have not yet fully familiarized myself with the documents. Why did you choose the case?"

It turns out, as he explained, it is not allowed. If I were a relative of the repressed, then it is necessary, and since it is me myself, then it is not categorically allowed. Especially for those to whom the highest measure was applied. They are strictly forbidden to get acquainted with the cases.

Explaining so incoherently, he took out a pill from his breast pocket and swallowed it, washing it down with water from a carafe. It can be seen that his roof began to go and he pushed it into place. He paused. And then, clearly through force, he says: "So you claim that you are exactly the person referred to in the indicated personal file?"

"I approve," I answer, "I can also show a pension certificate."

He looked at my pension certificate, and I see that it is time for him to call an ambulance. But the guy is young, strong, quickly recovered. He returns my passport and certificate and asks:

"What happens? It turns out that you worked directly with Lenin. Vladimir Ilyich wrote as much about anyone except Marx and Trotsky as about you."

I keep my mouth shut. And he just found out about it.

"How long did you work with Lenin?" the employee asks.

"Sixteen years," I answer, "a little more than that." Now he was silent. I see he's thinking about something. "So how does it work out," he finally broke the silence, "everywhere it appears that you were born in 1904. Right?" "Right," I nod my head. "So how could you work with Comrade Lenin for sixteen years if you were only thirteen years old in 1917?" the employee wonders.

"Age is not a hindrance to work," I answer, "the main thing is to love work."

"Were you on the line of the Cheka next to Lenin?" he continues to ask. "No," I answer, "through the NKVD." "But the NKVD was formed only in 1934," the employee flashed his knowledge.

"Quite right," I agreed, "and before that there was OPTU"

"Did you work in the protection of the leader?" the rehabilitating employee asked somewhat stunned.

"Exactly," I confirmed, "precisely in the guards. head of security."

"And after Lenin's death, were you repressed and kept in prison until March 1941?" the officer chuckled nervously.

"And then they shot me," I continued, "as it says in the file. March 18, 1941."

He paused again and says:

"Excuse me, but it seems that you are just laughing at me. You are demonstrating, as it were, contempt for us, the committee members, who are the successors of your cause. And in vain. As a person who worked for so many years with Comrade Lenin, you are entitled to a personal addition to your pension and an improvement in your living conditions. Therefore, here is a piece of paper for you and describe in detail how you met Comrade Lenin, how you worked with him, and so on. Do you understand?"

"I won't write anything," I answer, "and I don't need a pension supplement. I live alone, I need little. Yes, and I have two pensions."

"You are locking yourself up in vain," the officer says harshly, as if I were a witness in some criminal case, "you are locking yourself up in vain. We'll find out anyway. You will be worse off. You don't think, hopefully, you can beat the Committee?"

"May be enough? I asked. - They rehabilitated me - and thank God. Excuse me, I have to go home."

"So you refuse to answer?" the officer asks ominously.

"There is nothing to talk about," I answer, "before you is my personal matter. Everything is said there. I have nothing to add, dear comrade."

"It says," he almost yells, "that you were shot. And you are sitting in front of me. Why are you sitting in front of me if you were shot? But you know, I am of the opinion that in those years, for no reason, they neither shot nor imprisoned! So why were you shot?"

"What for? I ask. Everything is stated in the case. Read the thing. According to Comrade Lenin."

"And the investigation went right up to March 1941?" the employee hisses.



"Do you think this is my fault?" I ask.

"I think there is," the employee says, "you apparently also locked yourself in and did not want to tell the truth, as you did with me. No wonder you were sentenced to death. And even now you don't want to tell the truth. I get the impression that you are a hardened criminal."

"But I was rehabilitated," I wonder, "It says here: 'for lack of corpus delicti.'" How can you say that I am a criminal.

I was before rehab. And now I am an honest Soviet citizen and, as such, I will write a complaint against you to the prosecutor's office for supervision of organs."

Instead of answering, he suddenly takes the phone out of the desk drawer and starts muttering something in an undertone into the receiver. Then he says "Yes!" and heads for the exit.

"Sit here," he orders, "I'll be right back."

He looks around, removes everything from the table, locks the table, leaves the office and locks me. Of course, he took my personal file with him.

I miss one and look at the portrait of Lenin, and Ilyich, in turn, slyly screwing up his eyes, looks at me from the wall.

"Oh, Vladimir Ilyich," I think, "well, you made porridge! I gave you two special rations instead of one, I never turned off the light in the cell, I brought you a table lamp from the commandant's office, and you, it turns out, have been knocking on me all these years and, one might say, let me down under the 'tower'. I did not expect this from you!"

Then the key in the lock turns, the door opens and another employee enters. Older. The face is round and smiling. Gold-rimmed glasses, a gray three-piece, and a tie with a gold pin.

"Hello," he introduces himself, "Vladlen Vilorovich Kartashov, candidate of legal sciences. It is a pleasure to meet you, dear Vasily Lukich. You know, I love working with veterans. Veterans are the foundation on which our entire socialist society stands. Is not it?" I am silent. "Here a colleague told me," he continues, "that you, Vasily Lukich, worked for many years with Comrade Lenin himself and out of false modesty do not want to tell anyone about those unforgettable days that you spent with the founder of our party and state. I refuse to believe that it is. The colleague must have misunderstood or misunderstood something. It is so?"

I am silent.

"In your personal file," Vladlen Vilorovich gets excited, "eighteen handwritten letters from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin were found, in which the leader of our party gives you, Vasily Lukich, a detailed description. This is all the more strange since it is clear from the text of Lenin's letters that you were almost the closest adviser to the leader of the world proletariat.

In the last letter, Comrade Lenin demands that you take measures of the highest social protection as a person who knows too much.

It's just incredible, especially considering your age and the time being described. And now, when the entire Soviet people, I would even say - the whole world, is preparing to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Comrade Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, you, Vasily Lukich, in your own department, which, one might say, brought you to the people, do not want speak honestly and truthfully. In the end, you should have a feeling of ordinary human gratitude. After all, it was you that we rehabilitated and restored in all rights.

Soviet man. Therefore, I am sure that you will tell me everything."

"And if not?" I ask.

"Vasily Lukich," says the candidate of legal sciences, "we have rehabilitated you, but we can also reconsider our decision. Let's say, in connection with the newly discovered circumstances. And then, in the full range of rights granted to us by law, we can start an investigation into what you did under Lenin until you were personally exposed by him."

"Whoops," I think.

"And then," continues Vladlen Vilorovich, "we will figure out how you managed to avoid the punishment to which you were sentenced in 1941, and correct the mistake made then by our comrades for reasons of false humanism or some other. Am I being clear? Or do you have any questions?"

"All this is true," I agree, "but you probably noticed that the execution order was signed by Vsevolod Merkulov, who, as you know, was also shot in the Beria case, exposed as an agent of British intelligence. Do such prescriptions have the legal force you speak of without bothering with the burden of proof?"

"My dear," the graduate lawyer smiles, "does it really matter who these people were? The main thing is the documents that they managed to sign. And I want to honestly tell you that the execution order, together with the act of its execution, is a most serious legal document. And persons activated in this way are subject exclusively to posthumous rehabilitation. Do you claim to be alive? This I am not going to dispute. But that same fact makes your posthumous rehabilitation legally null and void. Do you understand my point? In order to be rehabilitated, you must go through the procedure provided for in the above order and act. I would really like you to realize the seriousness of your situation."

"So what do you want from me? - I ask, - so that I shoot myself? After all, you don't have the opportunity to activate me now."

"Why? - Vladlen Vilorovich smiles, - there is an opportunity. Of course, I am not the one who decides such issues, but a lot depends on how I report to the management."

"And they will shoot me?" I'm interested.

"I didn't say that," Vladlen Vilorovich becomes covered with spots, "I said that you could be activated. The legal meaning of this term is very broad and depends on many accompanying circumstances."

"For example?" I ask.

"For example, on the degree of assistance to the investigation by the person supposed to be activated," the candidate of legal sciences answers, "and on the decision of the leadership, as well as on the course of the investigative process itself."

"So," I say, "you and I, Vladlen Vilorovich, are not talking, but participating in the investigative process?"

"What am I telling you about. - the candidate of justice perks up, - and you are all pretending, sorry that you don't understand anything."

"It turns out," I try to figure it out. "I was not called for rehabilitation, but for interrogation?"

"Excuse me," Vladlen Vilorovich smiles again. Nobody invited you here. If you carefully read the agenda sent to you, then make sure that it was not sent to you, but to your relatives who have survived to this day. If one of them came, then we would not have any questions for them. They would have signed for a certificate of rehabilitation and washed away the stain of the family members of the enemy of the people by becoming ordinary and full-fledged Soviet citizens. But, since you yourself came here, to our great surprise, the situation has changed radically. As I already told you, persons of your category are subject only to posthumous rehabilitation. And since you are alive, there can be no question of any rehabilitation. Conclusion: you remain an enemy of the people, the investigation against you automatically continues. Moreover, this case was initiated at the insistence of Comrade Lenin himself! It's like a leader's command. And he demands to bring the matter, like all his other glorious deeds, to a victorious end. Are you even capable of realizing this? Once again I ask you not to aggravate your situation by defiantly refusing to answer the questions of the investigation."

"And in what capacity do I participate in the investigative process," I wonder, "accused or witness?"

The candidate of legal sciences thought for a moment, and then says, but without the former confidence in his voice:

"For now as a witness."

"But, according to the Code of Criminal Procedure," I retort, "I cannot participate as a witness in a criminal case brought against me, and even, if you believe you, by Comrade Lenin himself. And if I am the accused, then I have the right not to answer questions."

"Have you read the Code of Criminal Procedure? Vladlen Vilorovich asks me suspiciously, this is how he introduced himself to me, "why did you read him?"

"Vladimir Ilyich," I answer, "always taught that the code of procedure is the main weapon of the bourgeoisie in the struggle against the dictatorship of the proletariat. And so it must be known by heart. "Vasily Lukich," the leader told me, "your legal illiteracy contributes to the restoration of the power of the landowners and capitalists in our country."

"He told you correctly," Vladlen Vilorovich agreed, "and so that such a restoration does not happen, I am ready to explain to you that becoming an accused from a witness is as easy as shelling pears. Now, say, you are a witness, and in a second you have already become an accused. And, most importantly, they did not even notice it themselves. This is the essence and art of the investigative process. Now, after we have gone through a legal educational program together, I ask you, witness, will you testify on the merits of the question asked of you?"

"I already forgot the question," I confess, "repeat, please."

"Well," says Vladlen Vilorovich, "how and under what circumstances did you find yourself surrounded by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin? And for what purpose? Well, I'm waiting."

"And it's completely in vain, as Vladimir Ilyich used to say," I answer, "you won't wait."

"So you became the accused," Vladlen Vilorovich happily informed me, "because the witness is criminally liable for refusing to testify."

"And what measure of restraint do you choose for me?" I ask.

At that moment, the phone in the desk drawer rang. Vladlen Vilorovich pulled out of the box

phone and said: "Kartashov is listening. Silence, comrade general. Yes, Comrade General. Of course, Comrade General. Don't worry, comrade general." Then he hides the pipe in the table and turns to me again:

"If I had my way, I would not hesitate to take you into custody and arrange for detention. Since the person whom Comrade Lenin himself asked to be imprisoned, of course, poses an increased danger to society. However, the leadership, given your advanced age and hoping for your prudence, decided to give you an opportunity to reflect, to give you a chance to turn yourself in. Until then, go home. We will call you soon."

"Give me back my passport," I ask, getting ready to leave.

"The passport will remain with us for the time being," Vladlen Vilorovich answers, "for reliability."

- Some kind of idiocy! I said when Vassily Lukich fell silent, leaning back in his armchair, "could anything like that have happened in those days?" Something I can't believe.

"Wait a minute," replied Vassily Lukich, "something else happened. What I have said is only the beginning. I then returned home and began to remember what happened to me then in March 1941. Specifically, March 18th. In January, an order came to eliminate the special zones, and I began to prepare my wards for the stage. Where they are being transported, I don't know.

With Ilyich in April, on the 4th, we celebrated his seventieth birthday. He, I remember, buried himself in the newspapers, read everything to himself and clicked his tongue with pleasure. We hugged him goodbye. He even shed a tear: "Farewell, Vasily Lukich. It is unlikely that we will have to meet again." At that time I did not attach any importance to these words, but now I understand: Ilyich knew that they would soon shoot me, and therefore he said goodbye to me so warmly. 2

- Then I was seconded to the disposal of the personnel department of the NKVD, and in February our people's commissariat was divided into two: the people's commissariat of internal affairs and the people's commissariat of state security. The mess at first was terrible, because no one knew which people's commissariat he was in and to whom he was subordinate. Vsevolod Merkulov, an intelligent, educated and very sentimental man, was appointed People's Commissar for State Security. Her hair is dark brown, wavy, as I remember now - so it goes in waves from the forehead to the back of the head. The man was handsome. But sentimental, like Little Red Riding Hood. He speaks, for example, about the total destruction of the enemies of the people, while tears flow from his own. It turns out that he feels sorry for their children. "Children," he sobs, what are you guilty of? And where do they live with such a stigma? It's also more humane to shoot. Or die in infancy, so that they do not have time to realize their criminal nature. This is especially important now," he emphasized, "when, thanks to the genius of Comrade Stalin, the dream of a world revolution bequeathed to us by Ilyich is about to come true." And wept again. Painfully, he felt sorry for, probably, different Dutch and French children there, who were destined to become children of enemies of the people.

And now, I recall, it seems that it was on March 18 that Merkulov summoned me to his place. Well, such a seemingly insignificant episode that I did not pay attention to it then. And now he began to remember how it was? He seated me on a chair across from him, and I remember saying:

"How is the service, Lukic? What are you doing now?"

I report that I have been seconded to the personnel department, I am waiting for the appointment. "Yes, yes," Merkulov nods his beautiful head, "we are preparing a new appointment for you, Vasily Lukich. Until then, rest. Do you want a ticket somewhere? For a week or two?"

"Why," I think, "in my zone I have already become completely wild. Why not go for two weeks to the Crimea? It's not the season right now, but still. I agree." Comrade Merkulov obviously

rejoiced. He takes out a sealed envelope from the drawer and says:

"Here, Lukich, a ticket for you. Take it to Ivan Fomich - the commandant, he will arrange everything. And rest in good health. Just don't open the envelope. Ivan Fomich does not like this. Maybe give a bad ticket."

I took the envelope and get ready to leave. And he suddenly had tears in his eyes.

"Vasily Lukich," he sobs, "do you have children?"

"No," I answer, "there are no children."

"Why so," Comrade Merkulov is surprised through tears, "have you been married for a long time?"

"Well, like this," I spread my arms, "I've been married for a long time, but there are no children."

"It's even good," he says, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, "that you don't have children. And I have, you see, five children."

And photographs of all the People's Commissar's children in separate frames stood on his desk.

"Five," the Commissar sobs again. Who will take care of them?

I look - now bursting into tears. But he overcame himself, got up, kissed me three times, shook my hand and pushed me to the door: "Go, Lukich, rest. You deserved it." I go down the stairs to the basement to Ivan Fomich. He had an office there. It was necessary to go down to the second floor, and from there, from the other wing, an iron staircase went down, like a fire staircase, but with spans. We had to go down two flights, and there was an iron door with a sign "Commandant" and a bell. You call and they let you in.

I am walking along the corridor of the second floor, which means that I am going to this staircase and suddenly I look - Seryoga Shpigelglaz himself is walking towards me in person. In full form with two rhombuses on the buttonholes. I already backed away, but because I had information about the arrest of Seryoga back in November 1938 and about his execution. I even knew exactly the date of his execution: February 12, 1940, that is, almost exactly a year ago.

He also saw me and seemed delighted: "Great, Lukich! Where are you in a hurry?"

"I'm going to the commandant," I answer, "to Ivan Fomich. You need to get a ticket." - And I show the envelope.

"He will succeed," says Comrade Shpigelglaz, "there are no delays there."

He takes the envelope from me, stops some employee who was walking along the corridor, and orders: "Take the envelope to the commandant. Immediately!"

"I listen!" - he answers, takes the envelope and runs into the basement.

"Follow me, Lukich! he turns to me. "Don't ask questions."

"My vacation was crying," I think, and dutifully follow Seryoga, wondering how he managed to get away from the tower? Moreover, at the same time, get a second rhombus on the buttonholes?

Meanwhile, we go out into the street. Seryoga approaches the chic tinker. Some fellow jumps out, opens the door in front of him with one hand, and the second takes it under the visor. I also wanted to get into the car, but he looked at me so that I, as if I stumbled upon some invisible wall, and stopped.

And Seryoga, without turning around, says to me: "Go home, Lukich. Not a word about our meeting. You will be contacted."

I went home, or rather, went. I lived then not far away in the hostel of the NKVD command staff, two blocks from the Lubyanka, where I was supposed to have a room of ten square meters. After all, I was already then a major in the NKVD and wore four sleepers of an army colonel.

I come, the duty officer flies up to me: "Comrade Major, urgently to the phone. The phone has already been cut off. They are looking for you." I go to the phone, pick up the phone, I hear the voice of the head of the personnel department.

"Vasily Lukich! he shouts, is that you? How glad I am to hear your voice. I thought I couldn't. I was informed that you were going to spend your vacation in the Crimea. It's good that he didn't leave. Listen to me carefully - you remain in the ranks of the NKVD, and the NKGB has nothing to do with you. And they don't have the right to send you on vacation. Only we have the right, but we will not do it. Your vacation is cancelled. Tomorrow morning, urgently leave for Minsk. There you will find a sealed package with a special task. Read what's in the bag and destroy it! Understood?"

"That's right," I sighed, "understood."

And on March 19 he flew to Minsk. What happened next has nothing to do with this story. However, in any case, it is clear that I probably had two personal matters. One was kept in the NKVD, the other in the NKGB. And March 18, 1941, whatever one may say, was the last day of my work in the NKGB. And it was on this day that they recorded my execution. However, there have been such cases. There were situations when the execution was imitated, and the executed person himself with other documents was sent somewhere to perform a special task, having previously changed his appearance.

"Plastic surgery?" I asked.

"Not necessarily," replied Vasily Lukich, "after all, a person is remembered according to certain stereotypes. If, say, he wore a beard, it was shaved off. If not, then, on the contrary, they were forced to let go. It changes the face beyond recognition. Imagine Karl Marx without a beard. Thousands of people saw the king after 1918, but did not recognize. Why? The stereotype of his image was completely destroyed. Mustache, beard, hair - under the razor. The uniforms that he wore all his life were taken away. They gave out a jacket, a kosovorotka, trousers and Skorokhodov's boots. And go find out! Even if he himself began to assure that the king, who would believe him? The same with Lenin. Without a mustache and beard - the spitting image of Kim Il Sung. She looks at herself in the mirror and cries. When, by special request, he was allowed to let go of his beard "à la Tolstoy," the leader began to resemble Grigory Efimovich Rasputin. My own mother would not have known. At times my head was swimming: is this Lenin or not? So I'm talking about people whose appearance was known to the whole world.

And if we take, for example, the same Seryoga Shpigelglaz, then who knew him outside the Lubyanka? Yes, no one. He could have been shot at least every day. But still, they were warned. And, as they say, I was slapped without warning. They didn't force me to change my last name, or let go of my beard.

All this was not entirely clear, and therefore I decided to find out everything in the same house, but in different entrances.

Now Ivan Fomich has already died. And then he was a good guy. A slanting sazhen in the shoulders and proletarian hatred in the eyes. Liked to drink. To be honest, I always walked around drunk, but I didn't allow myself any outrages. Drink "knew". "It was you, sissies, who sat in warm rooms," he used to say, pouring himself a glass right behind the game of dominoes, "and in my basement it's always damp and cold. In addition, drafts from ventilation. And work, you know. If only

not alcohol, then everyone would have thrown back their hooves there."

I decided to talk to him myself in order to clarify all these incomprehensibility.

Usually, when we met with him, we almost never talked about the past service. And if they did, it was more about the funeral. For example, Ivan Fomich will take a glass, sniff it with his fist and say: "Lukic, do you remember such and such?" I nod my head, I remember. "So he died the day before yesterday," reports Ivan Fomich, "overnight." We are all silent. Died like that. We'll all die. Rest in peace!

It was not customary for us to discuss the past. Yes, and they preferred to keep quiet about the present.

I go in, so I'm in the yard, I see - Ivan Fomich is walking with a stroller and feeding pigeons from a bag with some grains: ghouls, ghouls. Either the granddaughter or the great-granddaughter is sitting in the stroller. Ivan Fomich was unlucky with offspring: three daughters and six granddaughters. One girls. And like a great-granddaughter was born. And he dreamed of his son. He wanted to create a dynasty, to attach him to the Lubyanka in his place as a commandant. But not fate. "The Lord denied this," Ivan Fomich lamented. He became very pious towards the end of his life. It was even rumored that he went to church on the sly. He was baptized, however, all with his left hand. In the right glass, and with the left he crosses himself and says: "They won't do anything with me and in the next world, because the Jews, it turns out, have crucified our God." Prior to that, he did not like the Jews because after the "Doctors' Case" he himself was turned out of the organs and almost imprisoned, but limited himself to a strict prisoner without entering and was transferred to party work.

So, Ivan Fomich is walking with a stroller in the yard. I go up to him and greet him:

"Great, Fomich!"

"And you, Lukic, don't get sick. Save you Christ."

"The case," I say, "I have something for you, Fomich."

He continues to feed the pigeons, shoots a glance at me and mutters:

"What business do you have with me? All cases at Lubyanka remained in the archive."

"In-in," I answer him in a tone, "things remained there, but you and I, Fomich, ended up here and don't know anything."

"What do you want to know about? Fomich is surprised and adds, "the less you know, the more you live."

"It's a trifling matter," I smile, "it concerns me personally. In March 1941, Fomich, in the line of your service, you didn't hear anything like that about me?"

"That's what you mean," Ivan Fomich chuckled, "I myself have long been tempted to ask you, Lukich, how did you turn out to be so cunning that you framed someone else instead of yourself for execution? I do remember. Some fellow comes to me and gives me an envelope from Seva Merkulov. In such envelopes, they handed me an order to be shot. I look, and your last name is in the prescription, but it's not you at all standing in front of me. My business is small, but I thought: "Lukic is probably leaving for a particularly secret mission, since such a mess." I don't have to ask any questions, you know. I accepted the order, sent the young man to the next world, formalized the act, as it should be, and that was the end of it.

"And what was his last name?" I ask.

"How do I know," Ivan Fomich is surprised, "I thought you knew. You are his instead of yourself

sent."

"I didn't send it," I honestly admit, "then Comrade Shpigelglaz stopped me in the corridor, took the envelope away and handed it over to him, ordering me to urgently bring it to you. He, like, quite by accident passed by along the corridor."

Here Ivan Fomich turned pale and his hands trembled so much that the bag from which he was feeding the pigeons fell from his hands to the ground and crumbled.

"Whom do you say you met then in the corridor? - the former commandant asked me hoarsely, - Spiegel-eye? Sergei?"

"He himself," I confirmed, "he was in uniform with two diamonds on his buttonholes. I remember well." Ivan Fomich crossed himself several times from right to left and from left to right and said:

"How could you, Lukich, have met him when, a year before, I had sprayed him with this very hand!" - And shows me his hefty fist.

I glanced at his fist and answered: "Well, I don't know who you sprayed, but I met him in the corridor of the second floor. After that, together we left the department, and he left in a new Ford.

"Where did you go?" Fomich asks, and I see that his lips are trembling.

"I don't know where," I say, "I only know that I left in a Ford. Where I don't know. He didn't report to me."

"W-what did you do afterward?" Ivan Fomich asks, stuttering.

"What did I do? Went home. To our hostel. He ordered me like this: "Go home, Lukich. You will be contacted."

I look - Ivan Fomich grabbed his heart with one hand, and with the other a pack of validol from his pocket pulls.

"Let's go, Lukich, to the bench," he says, "something caught my heart from your memories."

He was so excited that he almost forgot the stroller with his granddaughter in the kindergarten.

We sat down on a bench, Ivan Fomich lit a cigarette and said:

"This started in 1938. We then capitalized five hundred people per shift. Alcohol was given to us immeasurably. And if there was no alcohol, then everyone would have ended up in a madhouse. They drank heavily, I tell you. That's when it started. We slap someone, say, today, and tomorrow we look - he wanders around the basement, and even utters various anti-Soviet words, for listening to which one could also get the highest measure at that time. My guys began to be afraid of their combat post. Somehow a fighter comes up to me and says: "Ivan Fomich, go and look - there comrades Yagoda and Dzerzhinsky are wandering around the basement together and saying something." And what should I do? Or does he already have delirium tremens due to alcohol, or did he go crazy while on duty? I take my Mauser, I go to look. I look - actually. Both are in overcoats, Comrade Yagoda has the star of the general commissar on his buttonholes. I didn't drink alcohol either. During the working day, I drank at least two liters so as not to die. You know, Lukic, how exhausted we were. Slap each one, load each one onto the car, write an act for each. And all the conveyor, no sit down, no rest.



Still suffering from sciatica. So by the middle of the day I was already well under the fly.

I go up to them and, as expected, I report: "Commander of the department. Who allowed you to be at the facility without a special permit?" "We won't leave," both say in unison, until we wait for Vladimir Ilyich. "Comrades! I tell them. - Do not think in vain. Vladimir Ilyich has been lying in the mausoleum for fifteen years now. Apparently, you missed him by accident. "No, Vanya," Felix Edmundovich answers, "we won't warm up. We don't have it. They fool you, working people." And he hands me the leaves, and on them something is written by Lenin's hand. "Take them," orders Comrade Yagoda, "these leaves to Comrade Yezhov himself."

Then I hear someone behind me calling: "Comrade commandant! Ivan Fomich! It's an urgent matter." I open my eyes. It turns out that I leaned against the wall in some dark corner of the basement and fell asleep. And the fighter woke me up: "Forty more people arrived! It needs to be arranged!" I look, and in my hand I have the leaves that Comrades Yagoda and Dzerzhinsky ordered to hand over to Comrade Yezhov. Without reading them, I sealed them in an envelope, I called an assistant and ordered them to be taken, as ordered, to the reception of the people's commissar. And I command: "For work!"

We drank another half a mug and started. In the middle of the action, the doorbell rings. In that iron one that led to the basement, and the cry of the sentry: "Attention!". Comrade Yezhov himself runs into the basement with a revolver in his hand.

"Traitor! - shouts to me - I will shoot! Hand over your weapons! Where did you get these sheets?"

"Here they passed." - I say and point to the far corner of the basement. He rushed there. I hear the chorus: "We won't leave until we wait for Vladimir Ilyich." And the people's commissar's cry: "Get out of here, scoundrels! Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live forever!"

What they answered him, I didn't catch, but the people's commissar suddenly let out a terrible cry, dropped the revolver and ran out of the basement, lamenting: "I'm shit, I'm shit!". His adjutant was waiting for him at the entrance (he did not have a pass to the basement), he wanted to intercept Comrade Yezhov. Yes, where is it! Afterwards, they said: he ran to his office, wrote on a piece of paper: "I am shit", attached it to the tunic, tore off the golden cords with tassels from the banner of the Cheka-NKVD and hung himself on them. And then the adjutant, as always, runs to shoot him, but the phone call stopped him. The adjutant picked up the phone and heard Comrade Stalin's voice: "Don't shoot. Let it hang." No one saw this adjutant later either ...

"And the sheets," I ask, "these sheets, which are written by Lenin's hand. Where did they go?"

"I don't know how," Ivan Fomich answers, "I'm not very literate at all, I learned how to sign papers with difficulty. So I showed it to the commission."

"Which commission?" I asked.

"Shortly after this incident, a commission was formed," Ivan Fomich continues, "it seems to be an attestation commission. They call me and say: "To you, Ivan Fomich, the party renders a great honor. You are allowed to read in our presence the work of Lenin "Imperialism and ..." - I forgot further. The word is painfully tricky. In a word, they give me the confidence to read Lenin's work in the original aloud before the commission. And they put some leaflets with Lenin's manuscripts, taken for my sake from the archive against receipt. "This, they say, is a new way to encourage especially worthy comrades." I immediately remembered those sheets. I thanked for the trust, but admitted that I could not read in writing. I started to go to evening school, but there all the teachers were taken away and the school was closed. So I didn't learn. And thank God, as they say. I don't know what would have happened to me if they knew that I could make out Lenin's handwriting. And so they let him go in peace and were awarded another title. "Work hard, Fomich, on

the glory of socialism."

Fomich once again crossed himself with his left hand.

"But the matter did not end there," the retired commandant continued, "these outrages in the basement entrusted to me continued. A little later, Lavrenty Pavlovich himself came to us. For a long time he wandered alone in the basement. Forbidden to follow him. He could be heard exclaiming: "Ai! Wah! Wah! Wah!" And something in Georgian shouts. Nobody understood. And then a very strange thing happened. Lavrenty Pavlovich himself brought a priest to the basement, who was in the inner prison on a high-profile case with capital punishment. This same priest sprinkled all the corners in the basement, after which Lavrenty Pavlovich ordered to slap him and personally wrote out an order in my store room. And believe it or not, Lukich, but since then these outrages in the basement have ceased. So they stopped in the basement, but began throughout the building. They spread out on management, like cockroaches after pestilence. So, maybe you really met Spiegel-Eyes in the corridor..."

I wanted to ask Ivan Fomich something else, but my granddaughter, who was sleeping hard in the carriage, woke up and began to yell so that my ears stopped.

"Wet, right? Fomich declared victoriously and added in a quick voice, "Excuse me, Lukich, I ran, otherwise the women will tear me to pieces."

And running with a stroller disappeared into the entrance. And I remained sitting on the bench, trying to bring everything I heard from Ivan Fomich into some kind of system.

The fact that Ivan Fomich had already been treated for delirium tremens three times was known to the whole house, so far from everything they said should have been taken literally. A lot of things could just dream of the former commandant or imagine.

But, on the other hand, it was not Ivan Fomich who saw Seryoga Shpigelglaz in the control corridor, but myself. Moreover, I talked to him, and together we left the NKVD. All the checks that I later managed to undertake unequivocally showed that Sergei Shpigelglaz was shot on February 18, 1940 and, logically, could not have met me in March 41.

But he not only met me, but saved me myself from execution. If I had not met him, I would have gone straight to Ivan Fomich and handed him an envelope about my execution. Which, without any doubt, would immediately be carried out. So the ghost of Spiegel-Eye saved my life? What for? We weren't close friends and didn't even work together. True, when I was young, they came to the Cheka at the same time, but he worked in the foreign department, and I was in a special gulag, without any contact with each other.

But, perhaps, Lenin sent him, who in the end was stung by his conscience for what he repaid me for all the good things? Means. Lenin had a direct connection with these spirits, and, perhaps, power over them. The leader wrote denunciations against me and passed them through these guys to the Lubyanka.

I could not come up with an exact name or term for them. Of course, I knew such words as "ghost", "ghost" or "spirit", but I felt in my gut that these words were not quite suitable for applying to these specific creatures. The "Ghost" could be someone who was once a human. But whether they were human, I seriously doubted. They took on human form, but no one knew what kind of monsters they were originally. Only super-beings from time and space could so easily lead millions of people on such a "dirty place". And when their time came, they left, and ordinary people who refused God in their name, who tried to act with their methods, immediately brought everything to a boil. And everything fell apart. A devilish experiment can only be carried out by the devil. First of all, because millions of human lives mean nothing only to the devil. people up to

never reach such heights.

Who in this situation was Ilyich himself? I was completely convinced that, even while in the strictest imprisonment in my zone, who officially died in 1924, he supplied the Kremlin with his ideas for at least another sixteen years, and maybe more. Because I don't know where he went when my zone was disbanded at the beginning of the forty-first year, and they decided to liquidate me.

So I thought, left alone on the bench near Fomich's house. I didn't come up with anything worthwhile, except for realizing the significance of the main slogan of the past decades, which remained unchanged despite all the fluctuations in the general course of the party: "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!". I never seriously thought about this slogan, considering it one of the not-so-smart tricks of fooling ordinary people.

But today, on reflection, I realized that no one tried to hide the terrible state secret: the fact that Lenin is alive! He disappeared somewhere, transferring authority to Comrade Stalin, but he is alive! Moreover, he will be forever alive, because he is not a mere mortal and there is no way to deal with him by means known to man. And so he will live forever, constantly tempting his new disciples to achieve eternal happiness through widespread electrification, carried out in parallel with total destruction.

- So what does the golden jubilee medal have to do with it? I asked, when Vassily Lukich, tired of his story, leaned back in his chair, half-covering his pelvis.

"Wait," the veteran sighed, "we'll get to the medal."

"After my conversation with Ivan Fomitch," continued Lukich, "I decided not to clog my head with such thoughts any longer. It is already clear that such a powerful system as the NKVD, and later the MGB, will fool any of its employees, regardless of their position. We built a lot on such tricks. They say, for example, "follow such and such" - you are trying with might and main, and you are unaware that the one you are ordered to follow has received an order to monitor how diligently you fulfill the received order. And both enthusiastically knock on each other, and both are busy, and the authorities are satisfied, since both are also doing the current work.

That's it. And it turns out that who was guarding whom - I Lenin or Lenin me - is a philosophical question in principle. Both he and I spent sixteen years in the same zone. And I, for sure, frayed more nerves than the leader of the world proletariat. Moreover, he is "eternally alive", and by that time I had already turned sixty-six years old. Now, thinking about it, you understand how little it is, but then it seemed a lot. And yes, I felt pretty bad about it.

In other words, I live on. As promised, a new summons comes to me from the Lubyanka. I throw it in the toilet. Another one comes and I do the same. True, I am perplexed that they put summonses in the mailbox for me, and do not hand them against receipt. And if you didn't sign, then you didn't get it. The mood, of course, is disturbing. No wonder they asked me about Lenin. Something, it means that they got wind of all these things, and perhaps they probed me whether I would split or not. But they didn't attack him. I knew these jokes well.

There were many such operations and events that will remain secret for all eternity. But they were carried out by ordinary people who, for one reason or another, did not have time or could not be liquidated in time. It was under Andropov that everyone was remembered.

They call the old man to the Lubyanka and, for example, say: "Hello, Ivan Ivanovich. We heard that in the old heroic times you were engaged in such and such. Could you tell us more?" And the old fool is glad that he was remembered, and let's scratch your tongue,

forgetting what kind of subscription he gave forty years ago. They find him dead of a heart attack. Or in the parade, someone will bless him on the head for an indefinite vacation. And the smart ones, who have long understood our service with their hearts, will not succumb to any flattery. "I don't remember anything," and that's it. And even better: "Never did it. They confused me with someone else, dear comrades." They even raised their pensions.

Some cunningly tried to catch me, inviting supposedly for posthumous rehabilitation. But I was glad that I still didn't buy it.

A few more days pass. The century is getting closer. On the radio - Lenin, on TV - Lenin, in the newspapers - Lenin.

They dug up some old men and women who, it seems, saw Lenin, and forced them to broadcast almost around the clock to the delight of two hundred million who hung their ears. The audience is small - if they saw Lenin, then only from the crowd, and even then they lie by three-quarters.

Finally, the day of the Centenary itself arrived. I'm already afraid to turn on the radio, and even more so the TV. Newspapers, not reading, thrown into the garbage chute.

In the morning I took a string bag and went to the bakery across the road. Bought a bag and a pack of tea. I go out - I see: a huge car is standing right in front of the bakery with open doors and two young people in fashionable jackets and ties are leaning on the car and smiling broadly. They smile at me.

Everything was clear from their glassy smiles and eyes. It was possible not to ask for their certificates.

"Hello, Vasily Lukich," one of them says, "sit down, we'll give you a ride."

I was about to answer something, look, and another one showed up right behind me and pushes me towards the car with his belly.

"Sit down, dad," he says, "don't make me nervous."

"Oh, you brat," I answer him without turning around, "you think I'm very afraid of you! It's a pity for Saika, otherwise you would have plowed all the asphalt with my mug." "Yes," he agrees, "I agree with you. Plowing asphalt with mugs is not a tricky and dashing thing, but trampling a cod is a big sin, because a third of the world's population is starving."

While we were talking in this way, I was already in the car. In the back seat between two brats. And the third sat behind the wheel.

Go. We drove to the ring road and drove somewhere in the direction of Balashikha. We dived into some kind of tunnel, emerged and stopped at an iron gate punched through a blank white brick fence about three meters high. They signaled.

The shutters parted, opening another gate, about fifteen meters from the first. On the second gate there is an inscription: "Stop! Shooting without warning!"

We've moved in. The first gate closed behind us. "Vasily Lukich," one of the jerks turns to me, "do you know how to drive a car?"

"And what?" I ask carefully. "The thing is," explains the jerk, "we don't have permission to pass through the second gate. You will have to. If you drive a car, drive through. If not, then go on foot. It's not far there."

"Interesting," I say, "you don't have a permit, but I, it turns out, have one?"

"We were told that you have," they explain to me, "see for yourself. If they don't shoot, it means that the permit has been issued. And if not, then..."

At that moment, the second gate also parted, revealing a red poster stretched between the trees with the inscription: "Welcome to the convention!".

Here the jerks immediately began to fuss and jump out of the car, whining:

"Get behind the wheel, Vasily Lukich. Don't bring us under the monastery."

Nothing to do. I got behind the wheel and drove through the gate. There is an oak alley. The gate closed behind me, I was going down the alley. I don't see anyone. Neither those who should shoot without warning, nor those who promised to greet the guests of the congress.

Passed two barriers. The barriers are up, there is no one around. And silence, as in a crypt. Only the Volga engine purrs at low speed. Finally, the alley ends and a view of the three-story mansion of the late Stalinist period opens up. On the Greek portico, stucco depicts a "shield and sword". The Cheka is inscribed on one half of the shield, and the KGB on the other. Well, the sword, it is also a sword in Africa ... But this, so to speak, is a common thing. So, they brought me to some kind of "special station" of the KGB. I have seen enough such special points for the service. This doesn't surprise me.

Surprised by something else. To the left of the house is a large helipad, and on it is a huge helicopter with a white star on the fuselage and the inscription: "US AIR FORCE". That is, the US Air Force. And three blacks in overalls, shining with snow-white smiles, are spinning around. These were the first living creatures that I saw on this "special object". Thought it was fading. I rubbed my eyes - no, everything is in place ... And one of the blacks, who had "officer" written on his back, approaches the car smiling, raises his clenched fist up and shouts: "Mouth front. Govarich!"

I lowered the glass in the car and asked: "Where did you come from here, grimy?"

And he waves his fist and repeats: "Rot front! Lenin! Karasho. Veri Well..."

It is clear that he does not understand Russian. He gestures for me to get out of the car and points to the helicopter. I turned off the engine, I went to the helicopter... Negroes are spinning around me and chirping: "Russian! Karasho! Lenin! Quickly! Bistro walk nada!"

I climbed into the cabin of the helicopter, the blacks closed the hatch. The one that was the officer shook his finger at me and said: "Know the tuxedo!".

And they flew ... Where - I don't know. But not far, because after about half an hour they sat down. Around the forest. Some fellow in a helmet gets out of the pilot's cabin, points out the window: "Here is the path. Walk on it. Step to the right, step to the left - you understand - fire without warning to kill.

I was so surprised that I did not understand whether it was said in Russian or not. However, I studied English at the academy and understood something.

The blacks dumped the ladder, shouted: "Rot front!" and kicked me out of the helicopter.

I walk along an asphalt path among mighty firs and go out to a small stone building. The house is one-story, but solid. The doors are half open, and above them is the inscription: "Experimental Agricultural Station of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR."

As soon as I approached the porch, when suddenly a short, plump man runs out from there and wails in a weeping voice:

"Well, Vasily Lukich! Well, why are you late? Is it possible for so long? Everyone is already waiting!"

Grabs my hand and pulls me inside. I managed to notice that various agricultural implements were stacked in the hallway: rakes, shovels, pitchforks, hoes and scythes. The floor in the hallway is made of boards. On the doors there are signs like: "Senior Agronomist", "Seed Department", "Fertilizer Sector". On the wall is the newspaper Our Achievements.

He brings me to the door with the inscription: "Pantry of organic fertilizers." The pantry door was closed with a small padlock. Not even closed, because the lock was open and just hung with a bow on a loop. The comrade in the dressing gown removed the lock, and we entered the pantry, lined with cardboard boxes of various sizes, paper bags and barrels.

Against the wall opposite the entrance stood a large iron cabinet, decorated with a skull and crossbones with the inscription: "Danger for life!" A little lower hung a sign "Pesticides. Do not open without a respirator. Responsible comrade. Mitrofanov".

On the polished steel doors of the chemical cabinet, a dial-lock shimmered like nickel-plated buttons. The man in the dressing gown, without saying a word, began to press the buttons of the dial lock, and before I had time to come to my senses and ask for a respirator, the cabinet doors parted to the sides, opening the entrance to a rather spacious room, where the stranger literally dragged me by the hand.

The doors of the cabinet with pesticides silently closed behind us, and the bright light of lamps hidden in the ceiling lit up. The one who accompanied me leaned against one of the walls and muttered something like: "Third level", and then I realized that we were in an elevator ... I remembered that the house was one-story - which means that the elevator can only go down if it is not going to popular cartoon, fly to a distant kingdom.

However, I was in such a state that my thought did not work quite clearly and I could not correctly assess the situation.

The kidnapping at the bakery, the trip along some strange roads, the mysterious "special point" of the KGB, where the American helicopter was on duty, and, finally, the cabinet with pesticides, which turned out to be an elevator - all this did not in any way set up a cold-blooded comprehension of what was happening.

At that moment, the steel doors of the poison storage cabinet parted again, and an even brighter light hit my eyes. It was the light of several crystal chandeliers illuminating the hall, which the St. George's Hall in the Kremlin could envy. A huge table was laid in the hall, bursting with an abundance of fabulous dishes. Around the table in snow-white liveries, slender Negroes bustled with trays. And on the wall hung a huge banner: "LENIN LIVED, LENIN IS ALIVE, LENIN WILL LIVE FOREVER!" and under it stood a bust of the leader made of red

stone.

I breathed a sigh of relief, deciding that I was just invited to some private banquet on the occasion of Lenin's anniversary, but I made a big mistake, because a comrade in a white coat dragged me by the hand past the tables with dishes, bustling blacks, then pushed me through a small door with the inscription "Exit to the stage. Left-hand side".

He closed the door behind me and disappeared, and I found myself in the semi-darkness of the wings. From my place one could see some kind of presidium, above which towered the huge number one hundred against the background of a red laurel branch and an equally red profile of the leader.

I could only see the speaker from the podium from behind, but his voice made me shudder and back away. I wanted to run back to the banquet hall, but the door I had just been pushed through was locked. Or rather, I did not find any door at all.

I was scared like never before in my life. And in general, I don't know what would have happened to me if someone's piercing whisper had not whistled into my ear:

"Go on stage and sit on the presidium. There is a place left for you on the edge. You are not supposed to stand here. Don't look back!"

But I still looked around and, although I didn't find anyone behind me, nevertheless, with an uneven step, I headed for the exit to the stage, inwardly trembling from the voice broadcasting from the podium.

"No, no, no, and still no haz, comrades! the speaker addressed the audience, gesticulating frantically at the same time. "Vopgos at this stage is not how to ghash what is naughty, but how to save and multiply what our pagtia owns on a completely legal basis! And as you know, some lackeys, pegevehtysh and khenegaty, without talking about political pgostitutes, are trying to cast doubt on the very legitimacy of the existence of our pagtia as such! How do you like all this, comrades?"

There was a buzz in the hall, indicating that everyone present did not like such a formulation of the question at all. I looked at the presidium. There, with his head in his hands, sat Andropov himself, and to his right were Generals of the Army Tsvigun and Chebrikov. On the left, one seat was free, then sat Dr. Chazov, the head of the Fourth Directorate of the Ministry of Health and some type with a sleek, clearly non-Russian face. It was this guy who looked at me when I came backstage and gestured for me to an empty seat next to him.

I looked into the hall - an honest mother! In the first row, there are only "mokrushniks" sitting. All in general uniforms and, like Christmas trees, sparkle with orders. The killers of orders, apparently, were not spared. Even on the unfortunate Mikhoels, who was cleaned in Minsk by a whole brigade - and his hand could be slapped, they did not hesitate to single out two Orders of the Red Banner of War, three Orders of the Patriotic War of the first degree and three Orders of the Red Star! Imagine, the Patriotic War of the First Degree. Battle Red Banner! For what? For the fact that twenty snouts crushed a little unfortunate Jew on their own territory with a Studebaker!

And you can imagine what kind of rewards were poured in for "mokrushniks" when they overwhelmed someone bigger, and even over the hill! At this point, military orders were pouring in: Kutuzov, Suvorov, Alexander Nevsky and Bogdan Khmelnitsky. And these orders sparkle with diamonds, like stars on the camisoles of nobles.

They sit one to one - I know everyone well: Sudoplaptov, Ogoltsov, Eitingon, Lebedev, Shubnyakov, Kosyrev and, of course, my warm friend Zhenechka Pitovranov.

There is a funny story with him. He did not like to beat the defendants. He kept saying that it was necessary to switch to civilized methods of interrogation: torture with electric current, various acids, and not breed the Middle Ages with sticks and fists. He even offered to give soldering irons to each investigator, or at least electric irons, if there is no special equipment. For nothing, at the age of thirty, he already received a major general.

He came to us at Lubyanka and began to put his idea of "civilized" interrogations into practice. I found some kind of machine in the utility room "to speed up the investigative process", which the Germans gave us as a token of friendship even before the war. He blew the dust off her and decided to use it at the very first interrogation. Yes, he mixed up some terminals or wires and arranged a short circuit in the entire Lubyanka. It came to Stalin himself. Pitovranov's attitude to this sabotage was the most direct. He ordered him to be put down. I know about it, because I interrogated myself in the case.

"Lukich," he asked me, "help me, report to Comrade Stalin that I have a powerful plan. If it comes to fruition..."

"So the whole of Moscow will be left without electricity," I ask, "or will you let the whole GOELRO plan go to waste?"

"No," he almost cried, "that's not the point. I have a plan to deal with the Jews. Here you can even do without electricity at all. For example, I won't even touch the table lamp on my desk anymore. So tell, Lukich, Comrade Stalin - our father and teacher.

My case is small - I passed it on, and what happened next is well known. And half a year Stalin did not live, as the plan of Zhenechka Pitovranov began to be put into practice.

And next to Pitovranov - who would you think? My neighbor himself, Ivan Fomich, is seated. But most of all I was surprised not by the fact that Ivan Fomich was here, but by the fact that he was a lieutenant general. That would never have thought. How did he become one? The position is something like a colonel. Maybe he was not only the commandant? Some surprises!

But most importantly, everyone is familiar. There are no outsiders even in the presidium, because, after all, Dr. Chazov also had the rank of a KGB general. But my neighbor on the right confused me a little, but he was still young, and I could simply never see him.

In addition to the stalls, there was also a balcony in the hall, on which some types in masks were sitting. And on the balustrade another poster was stretched: "Greetings to the participants of the 1st Congress of Radical Revolutionaries!"

While I was trying to figure out where I actually ended up - at a meeting on the occasion of Lenin's anniversary or at the first congress of radical revolutionaries - the speaker from the rostrum continued his speech.

"Comrades! he shouted, "I am now enriching myself with you, not as the head of our pagtia and its founder, but as a citizen of the United States of Amegica. As such, I want to warn you, comrades, that it is more reliable to save money in a sthana with a gazvited and contholic banking system than in sthanas, which are called totalitarian.

Here you are, comrades," he turned to someone in the hall, "how do you get your money? Sovegsheno vegno - immured in the basement of a country cottage. And why, let me ask you? Because you're afraid to screw them. Or you have nothing to use them for, since you live on state support. It is paramount to understand, comrades, that by living in this way, you are robbing yourself and our pagtia. That is why our main goal at this stage is to transfer all the money from the "pods", where they are now, to the accounts of leading Western banks, a list of which Comrade Andgopov has. This will increase the capital and discourage the desire of some getivs who are pissed off oppogtunism, to run around and look for this money, as if they were financial inspectors, and you and I are NEPmen!"

The thunder of applause drowned out the last words of the speaker.

At that moment, the stranger sitting next to me leaned towards me and asked, "How are you, Vasily Lukich?"

"Do you know me?" I asked instead of answering, somewhat coming to my senses.

"I heard a lot about you from my client," he explained, nodding his head in the direction of the speaker. "Actually, at the request of my client, you are here. You were not supposed to be invited here, since this club is intended only for the generals of the department you know. And you, unfortunately, are not."

"Is that so? - I was amazed, - and that masked scammer over there, who sits on the balconies, - this is also



generals?

"These are even more than generals," a stranger whispered directly into my ear, "these are marshals. There are even several generalissimos. My client didn't mind their presence even though they have guest status."

"You say 'my client,' I whispered back, 'but if I'm not mistaken, this is himself...'"

"Shh," the stranger interrupted me, "it's forbidden to pronounce any names here! Otherwise, you can put everyone in a stupid position. And who needs scandals on their own birthday?"

"Especially on the anniversary," I agreed, "do I also have the status of a guest of the congress here?"

"No, no," he whispered quickly, "you are called at the insistence of my client as a witness. The fact is that the local leadership, in determining what we, as lawyers, call the share of the final product, came to a result with which my client does not quite agree. He hopes your testimony will help clear up this petty misunderstanding. In addition, he became aware that they wanted to isolate you. He was very indignant, because all this confirmed my client's worst fears that by isolating one of the key witnesses, they would try to maintain the status quo, despite the obvious absurdity. Therefore, taking advantage of the anniversary, my client decided to deal with everything personally with the feasible help of people like you, dear Vasily Lukich. Do you understand the idea?"

I nodded my head, although I didn't understand a single word of what the lawyer was trying to tell me, I just wanted him to get rid of me, because I really wanted to listen to his client.

Applause in the hall, meanwhile, turned into a standing ovation. Everyone stood up and chanted loudly. What exactly - I could not make out, because the "mukrushniks" sitting in the first ten rows jumped up and yelled "Hurrah!".

At that moment, Zhenechka Pitovranov saw me in the presidium, choked and coughed. Apparently, he remembered how in October 1951 I also quietly appeared in the presidium of the expanded party meeting of the Ministry of State Security and took him from there to the inner prison cell on the orders of Comrade Stalin himself.

For quite understandable reasons, he decided that my current appearance on the presidium was connected with the same thing. I see him pushing Sudoplatov with his elbow and pointing at me with his eyes. And Sudoplatov had it even worse. After the death of the leader of all peoples, he fell under the hot hand of Comrade Molotov's wife and received a fifteen-year sentence, which he actually served from bell to bell. He looked in my direction, recognized me and grabbed his heart, and it went along the front rows: "Lukich is in the presidium! Lukic is on the podium! Trap! We've been betrayed again!"

Where such a gloomy fame came from about me - I do not understand. Half of them didn't know me at all. But some kind of horror seized everyone. "Lukich," they said to each other, turning pale with horror, "Lukich is in the presidium!" Panic began among the "mukrushniks" ... They no longer listened to the report, and with their lips dead from fear, they did not whisper, but almost shouted: "Lukich! Lukic! Lukic! Some jumped out of their seats and rushed to the exit.

The speaker just moved on to a very interesting topic that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is not an end in itself, but a means of the initial accumulation of capital necessary for the scientific and technological revolution on a global scale. And a revolution on a world scale would never have been possible without a socialist revolution in one single country. Noticing the confusion in the hall, he, as always, instantly assessed the situation and accepted

the only correct solution is to dissociate.

"Calm, comrades! - he addressed the panicked "mukrushniks", "I don't know who invited Vasily Lukich here, but I assure you that he has no authority!"

"He never had powers!" Pitovranov squealed in response, trying to climb over Sudoplatov, who was stuck between the seats.

"He never had authority, and he tortured me with electric shocks!" Zhenechka yelled.

Hearing this cry of Pitovranov, the gallery burst into applause and chanted: "Lukich! Lukic!"

"I see," the lawyer leaned towards me again, "that you, too, are a goose, which is what you need, although you are not a general. It turns out that everyone knows you and, as I see it, far from the best side. What are they so upset about?"

"I received all orders from Lukich! yelled Sudoplatov, stuck in the aisle, "I swelled in the zone for fifteen years, and he sits on the presidium!"

"Lukic! Lukic! the masked marshals and generalissimos yelled from the balcony. "Viva le commandanto Lukic!"

"Comrades! Andropov jumped up in the presidium, "we have gathered here not at all to honor Vasily Lukich, but in honor of the centennial anniversary of the birth of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin!" I ask for silence or order to clear the hall. Comrade Pitovranov! Calm down, take your seat. Comrade Sudoplatov! Someone help him, take him to the toilet. Comrades on the balcony, stop the hysteria! What are you yelling "Lukic!". Do you even know what "Lukic" is? You can't behave like that!"

"He tortured me with electric shock!" yelled Zhenechka Pitovranov again, unable to climb over the Sudoplatov.

The lawyer looked at me with genuine interest.

"Lukic! Lukic! the marshals raged on the balcony. — Viva, Lukic! Lukic - yes, the Yankees - no!"

I became uncomfortable.

"I didn't torture anyone with electric current," I confessed to the lawyer, "and I didn't give Sudoplatov any orders. They slander out of fear."

"We know, we know," the lawyer smiled thinly, "my client testified under oath ..."

Here I could not stand it, jumped up, but how I would scream. And I have a commanding voice, and there is some special acoustics in the hall. So it happened to me - just the voice of God!

"Zhenya! - I yell at Pitovranov, - how could I torture you with electric shocks when the entire Lubyanka was de-energized through your fault? Have you forgotten why you, asshole, were imprisoned then? When, through your fault, we all sat with kerosene lamps and candles? I could only stick a burning candle up your ass!"

The lawyer grabbed my sleeve and began to pull me back into a chair, whispering:

"Do not refute, Vasily Lukich! Don't disappoint the balcony. On the balcony sits the future of the world labor movement."

I sank into a chair and said to the lawyer:

"Let them learn to work without electricity. Otherwise, they will do worse things than Pitovranov."

Oddly enough, but after my brief, although perhaps overly emotional speech from the floor, silence fell in the hall, broken only by the sobs of Sudoplatov, on which Pitovranov was sitting, breathing heavily. Someone managed to escape from the hall, because suddenly there were many empty seats.

"Are you afraid of Lukich, comrades? the speaker asked the silent audience. - No, comrades! You were not afraid of Lukic. Someone who, but I know that Lukich should not be afraid! You were not afraid of Lukich, but the prospect of pulling out, excuse me, from the "pods" the valuables stored there, including gold crowns and photos, torn from the detainees right on the dophos, hand them over to the bank and start a civilized way of life. Is that so, comrades?"

"He burned me with a kerosene lamp," whispered Pitovranov, losing consciousness.

"It's too early today," the speaker summed up, "or it's too late, which is the same thing."

Grabbing the sheets with the summary of his speech, the speaker went to his place in the presidium.

It was only then that I noticed that he was wearing a World War II US Army brigadier general uniform with chaplain insignia.

I tried to calculate when he managed to rise to the rank of brigadier, but I lost my way and only thought that all the generals were really here, except for me and, probably, the lawyer.

"Are you a general too?" I asked him.

With a mixture of majesty and condescension, he nodded his head.

"Of course. I am a major general in the Israeli army and represent the finance department, which oversees my client's financial affairs. We intervene only when there are misunderstandings on an international scale."

Then Andropov gets up and announces: "Comrades! I declare the solemn part dedicated to the centenary of the birth of Comrade Lenin closed. I ask everyone to proceed to the banquet hall. Anniversary medals lie next to cutlery. I ask everyone to take only one medal. Comrades who, for well-known reasons, could not come to the congress, will be given medals later."

The doors, masked by heavy curtains, opened, and everyone began to leave the hall with a noise. Someone hesitated, but an announcement followed on the broadcast: "Please everyone to leave the hall. Hurry, comrades. A closed meeting of the presidium will be held in the hall!" Some fellows in Budyonovkas dragged out by the arms and legs those who were seized by panic during the slanderous hysteria directed against me. I also wanted to run off to the banquet hall, because, frankly, I managed to get really hungry, but the lawyer asked me to stay a few more minutes.

Then I remembered about the pouch, which I bought in the morning at the bakery, and realized that it was gone along with the string bag. There was no one to complain to. Most likely, I myself left it in the car when I transferred from the KGB Volga to the American helicopter.

Meanwhile, Andropov, Tsvigun and Chebrikov surrounded the main speaker and excitedly began to prove something to him, to which he, laying both hands behind his back, answered: "Nonsense! Nonsense! It's all nonsense!"

"Excuse me," the lawyer told me, "sit here for a while. I have to participate in the conversation

because my client is not always responsible for his words, and even more so for his actions. This, in fact, is the whole point of the issue. Back in the old days, a group of leading Swiss psychiatrists made an official conclusion about his complete insanity. You know well what this led to. However, for some reason, no one took into account the enormous wealth of my client and did not establish custody of the property, limiting itself only to its isolation. Only the United States, through the mediation of several leading banks, guessed to do it in time. And at the present time, that is, I wanted to say - literally up to the present time, Moscow is trying to challenge the legal impeccability of the established guardianship, based again on the complete insanity of my client. But this

nonsense.

The lawyer looked at Andropov and the generals surrounding his client and said hastily: "Excuse me. Looks like my time has come. Stay where you are!"

Grabbing a folder with some papers, the lawyer hurried to the rescue. He did it on time, because the situation at the "closed meeting of the presidium" was clearly heating up. Andropov's protruding ears were as red as boiled crayfish. Tsvigun and Chebrikov waved their arms and spat, and the client of my lawyer friend, who was almost a head shorter than all of them, stood imperturbably, with his thumbs tucked into the harness straps of his American uniform. At that moment, when the lawyer joined them, I began to listen to fragments of phrases that reached me:

"It's all nonsense! Where did that five percent come from?"

"Not five percent, sorry, but seven!"

"Fine. Seven percent. Where did they come from, I ask you?"

"But take a look at the documents yourself!"

"Nonsense! And don't give me those papers. They are nonsense and insinuations!"

"Calm down! What does nonsense mean? Look and see!"

"I don't want to look! This is pure fraud, my friend!"

"Fraud? And the boots?"

"What other boots?"

"Like what? Here are eight pairs. At the rate of one pair for two years!"

"There were no boots!"

"How can you say that when there is a living witness?"

And then everyone started pointing fingers at me. At that moment, the client slapped General Chebrikov in the face with his left hand and yelled: "I'll shoot!"

With his right hand, he wanted to do the same with Tsvigun, but he jumped back in time.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen! the lawyer squealed, "I remind you that my client does not bear any legal responsibility for his actions. In addition, he is a US citizen, and all this can lead to unfortunate consequences..."

General Chebrikov, holding his cheek, came up to me and asked:

"Vasily Lukich, did you issue felt boots to the zone from the warehouses of OSOAVIAKHIM or received them

from the funds of the Stakhanov movement?"

"No way," I replied, "we received high fur boots from the warehouses of polar aviation."

"See," yelled the client, "what did I tell you? Here is your living witness! What do you say now? What boots will you hang on me?"

"Gentlemen," declared the lawyer, "there is a monstrous violation of the union treaty. I want to formally warn you on behalf of the trustee country that my client, as the controlling shareholder, has a perfectly legitimate right to terminate the Treaty of December 30, 1922, declaring it legally null and void..."

"I'll drive everyone to hell! the client promised, "if you cheat again or don't transfer on time."

Here Andropov turned so purple that it seemed to me that he was about to have a stroke. His face was distorted and he began to yell at Tsvigun and Chebrikov:

"I told you it would end like this! Why didn't they shoot when the order was given? Why did they lie in the reports that the order had been executed? See what happens now? Where can we get money? I will put the question about you to the Politburo!"

Chebrikov was silent, holding his cheek, and Tsvigun began to justify himself in a whining voice:

"What do we have to do with it, Yuri Vladimirovich, if all the documents on enforcement were in the personal file? Are we to be asked for this? You have to ask Yezhov."

"From Yezhov? Andropov spat with saliva, "Yezhov was shot a long time ago, for your information."

"Then from Merkulov," Tsvigun did not give up, "he was ordered!"

"Merkulov was also shot," shouted Andropov, "and Abakumov was shot, and Comrade Beria was shot. This one is alive!"

"I will live forever," replied the client, "or do you not know?"

"It's not about you," Andropov answered irritably, "but about him."

And pointed to me. I silently watched the altercation. "What's the matter?" - inquisitive client.

"Didn't he snitch?" I asked.

"Choose expressions, my dear! What does snitched mean? You should have snitched! Pakhgia entrusted you with the most responsible post. Why am I dumping you? For someone to knock for you? Or for you to knock yourself, excuse me for being frank? Who should have presented the balance to me? He or you? I'm getting rich for you, comrade. Or is there something you don't understand?"

"So there is no money," the crimson-red Andropov squeezed out of himself.

"That doesn't concern me," the client continued, "that's your problem. What does no money mean. And where, may I ask, have they gone? A? And you rummage through the basements of the dachas of the reincarnates and, I assure you, you will instantly collect the required amount. And if you don't get it, I will cancel the contract of the twenty-second year, and live as you wish! Have you ever read Marx? Just don't say you read it. If you read it, you would know how Marx says: "Take everything!" Exactly

so: take, take, take!"

"But Leonid Ilyich thinks..." Andropov began to explain.

"Mr. Brezhnev," the lawyer recalled, "does not have the right to sign money. And therefore references to it are inappropriate."

"And I don't give a damn about him at all," the client broke up. - Bribes are smooth from him. He never signed financial documents in his entire life, but only signed payrolls and took bribes. All demand from you! I give you twenty-five years, no twenty years. Do not pay off the bill - I am dissolving the Union!

"In order to pay off the bill," Andropov said despondently, "I need to become general secretary."

"For God's sake," the client shrugged, "do I mind. If you want to become the general secretary, please, if you want - the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, please, if you want to become a metropolitan ... "

"My client means," the lawyer interjected, "that he will not object to a change in the political regime in the territory entrusted to you. Just don't break your payment obligations."

"But no counter-revolution, wrecking and sabotage! squealed the client, "for this execution on the spot!"

He pointed his finger at Andropov:

"I'll shoot you first!"

Andropov turned pale.

"Your second!" he pointed at the recoiling Tsvigun and turned to Chebrikov. He covered himself with his hands.

"Do not be offended, Genosse! the client said affectionately, "it is not always possible to contain proletarian hatred." Andropov, continuing to turn pale, suddenly thrust his hand into the back pocket of his trousers and shouted: "Choke!" He took out a stack of hundred-dollar bills and handed them to the client.

"Okay," said the client, accepting the pack, "you second. His first."

And he pointed to Tsvigun.

"My client wanted to say," the lawyer interjected, "that such a development of events is possible if you continue to trample on the property rights of my client in such a gross way. He may be too harsh, but you will not deny my client's full right to change the negligent managers of his property. If this does not help, then the Treaty of December 30, 1922 becomes, pardon the bluntness, simply ridiculous. Is not it?" All three, to whom this question was addressed, were dejectedly silent. Their eyes lost their gambling gleam. It was obvious that they had absolutely nothing to cover.

"Twenty years," whispered Andropov, "only twenty years..."

"You think that this is not enough - twenty years," the lawyer inquired, "I agree that this is not much, especially when you consider that my client has eternity at his disposal. But, since you cannot operate with such categories as eternity, the twenty-year term provided to you to cover the loan looks quite impressive. I would even

said that this is the most favored nation accepted in the civilized world.”

At the word "term" the client came into a kind of good-natured animation. He patted Andropov on the cheek and said joyfully:

“Twenty years of correspondence, and then the highest measure – isn’t it a fine example of ghe-evolutionary expediency? Read the comments on the fiftieth volume of the complete sokhaniye of my writings, and you will feel much better. It clearly states that you cannot exist under conditions of capitalist encroachment. You’ve been given enough in the gemeny to realize it. Now the game is ending. Do you remember the slogan: “Either we win, or they win. It is not given.” We didn’t win. Draw your own conclusions.”

“I read the 50th volume,” Andropov admitted, “there are the words of Comrade Trotsky in the comments: “The path to Paris and London lies through the cities of Afghanistan, Punjab and Bengal ...”

“What are you talking about? - the client was amazed, - did he write like that? What a clever Lev Davidovich! Try it. Perhaps this is the only way out.”

“We need to get ready,” Andropov muttered.

“You still have twenty years,” the client patted Andropov on the shoulder, “get ready.”

“I would like to remind you,” the lawyer said to his client, “that our time is running out. On behalf of my client, gentlemen, I want to thank you for the wonderful welcome and cooperation. Unfortunately, my client still has a lot to do.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” the client started up, “let’s hurry. It’s important to be in time everywhere — and rumble, rumble and rumble!”

They both darted backstage like a pair of mouse-colored cats and disappeared.

“Let’s go to a banquet,” Andropov sighed, “I thought that at least on the anniversary he would relax. I didn’t write off a single penny.”

The KGB chief wiped the sweat from his forehead and, accompanied by Tsvigun and Chebrikov, moved from the conference hall to the banquet hall.

I also followed them, because I was terribly hungry. In the morning I didn’t even have breakfast, because I was caught at the moment when I was buying a polar bear and tea in a bakery.

I went to the door, which was closed. But it had a peephole, like in a prison cell. I knocked.

“What would you like?” I heard a pleasant female voice through the closed door. “I want to go to the banquet hall,” I explained. “Not allowed,” the voice replied. “Why not? I protested. “If I’m not a general, then it’s not allowed?”

“Witnesses are not allowed,” a woman’s voice patiently explained, “don’t you know that witnesses are not supposed to be in the room during a closed hearing? Were you interrogated?”

“Yes,” I replied in confusion, “like they were interrogated.” “Then go home,” advised a female voice, “or do you want to give additional evidence?” “No,” I said, “I don’t want to testify. I want to eat. Where can you get a bite to eat?” “Don’t talk nonsense, citizen,” her melodious voice sounded annoyed, “we don’t have a canteen or a restaurant. Go home before we bring you up for hooliganism and disrespect to the tribunal.”

"But I don't know how to get out of here?" I almost begged, but the peephole slammed shut, and I again found myself in front of a tightly closed door.

I returned to the stage and went to the right wings. The door was open, and I entered a small room where a middle-aged man in armlets was sitting at a simple clerical table.

"Are you still here? he was surprised, "I already wanted to let the car go."

We went down a long corridor. All the time I was waiting to be stuffed into that very cunning elevator, lifted to the agricultural station of the Academy of Sciences and put into an American helicopter. But nothing of the sort happened. We came to a wide marble staircase going down in two flights. Downstairs was a vast hall decorated with portraits of members and candidate members of the Politburo. On the wall is written in gold letters: "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live forever!" This inscription was duplicated in the same golden letters in the languages of all the peoples of the USSR. The Uzbek variation of the slogan threw itself into my pelvis: "Lenin tysh, Lenin kysh, Lenin tokhtamysh!" "What is this building?" I asked my guide.

He gave me a very strange look: "Palace of Pioneers. You were invited to a meeting of active members of the pioneer organization of the capital with veterans of our party in honor of the centennial anniversary of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. I myself really liked your story that Ilyich did not have money to buy felt boots and you had to get them at the Cheka warehouse. You just got delayed. Everyone has already left." "I'm lost," I admitted honestly.

He shook his head sympathetically, "Years, years... I understand."

And delicately shut up.

"Excuse me," I asked, "is there any other entrance here? Say, the back door..."

"This is the back door," he explained. "The front door is already closed."

Meanwhile, we went out into the street, or rather, into the square, where the stone Ilyich, in a sacred impulse, held out his hand to us with his cap clamped in it.

My guide approached an old Moskvich that was standing alone and said to the driver: "Drive the veteran to Elektrozavodskaya. Be there by seven in the morning." "Tomorrow I have a day off," he replied, "Lesha will work for me."

I did not begin to find out why they were taking me to Elektrozavodskaya when I needed to go to Krasnopresnenskaya, but silently squeezed into the car, and we drove along the darkening streets. It drizzled rain.

I probably dozed off, because I woke up from the words of the driver: "We have arrived, dad. Get out."

We were standing at the metro station Elektrozavodskaya. The rain continued... Having raised the collar of my jacket, I began to get out of the car, rummaging through my pockets in search of a nickel on the subway. Having slammed the door of the Moskvich, I was already preparing to run to the metro entrance when I heard the driver shout behind me:

- Hey, dad! Do you have sclerosis? Avoska forgot!

I turned around. The driver, opening the door of his Moskvich, held out a string bag to me,



in which lay my pike and a pack of tea, bought in the morning at the bakery. I automatically took the shopping bag, said "thank you" and, thinking badly, wandered through the puddles to the subway.

When I finally got home, I boiled the tea, and when I began to cut the cod, I felt that the knife clinked on something hard. Quite surprised, I decided that I had received another hello from the bakery. It was often shown on TV how many citizens found washers, nuts, bolts in bread and rolls. And one even found a brand new German bayonet in the loaf. Now, then, my turn has come.

Having broken the cod in half, to my great surprise I found there this anniversary medal and a note written in a painfully familiar handwriting: "Thank you, Comrade Vasily!". The note was without a date ... What dates can there be for someone who has eternity ahead?

And the medal - here it is: gold, numbered. And the number on it is not just worth it. But I'll tell you about it sometime later.

"Y-yes," I murmured, "you can go crazy with your fairy tales, Lukich. Some kind of mystic!

Mystic, you say? Lukich chuckled. - It's not mystic! I'll tell you something worse than that - that would be mysticism! And in this story, mysticism is not all. When I returned home, my roof also swam. What happened to me? Where did I really spend the day of Lenin's anniversary? Then I remembered: Ivan Fomich was also present there. We need to talk to him.

I go out the next morning to the garden in our yard. Pensioners sit at a table on a bench and brag about commemorative medals to each other. Received at the housing office. I come up and ask. "But why is Ivan Fomich not visible?"

The trouble, they answer, is with Ivan Fomich on the basis of alcohol abuse. Yesterday I overdid it, put on a general's uniform - and after all, just a major - and went somewhere to celebrate Lenin's anniversary on someone else's invitation. And there, apparently, he added more and moved his mind. He began to lie to everyone that he personally saw Lenin on the day of the anniversary. He was sent to a madhouse. Which one is unknown. My wife was crying, saying that, probably, Fomich would not come out of the madhouse."

"Yes. - Think. - everything fits together ... So, I didn't imagine it either. Fomich got burned because of his vanity." And you say - mysticism. What kind of mysticism is this, if I saw Ivan Fomich with my own eyes in a general's uniform in the front row?

"Lukich," I ask, "do you even understand what the word "mysticism" means?

"You still want to make me look like an illiterate fool," he answers without much irritation, "but I understand your point. Mysticism is when some event happened, and no one can explain it, whatever one may say. And what is the mysticism here, if everything is logical and clear?

- What is clear? I almost screamed. For example, nothing is clear to me. Rather, on the contrary. From your stories I will soon get myself into a psychiatric hospital.

"Well, what's incomprehensible here," Lukich grinned condescendingly, "let's remember: in 1979 we got into Afghanistan? We got in. Was Tsvigun slapped in 1981? Slapped. Did Andropov become general secretary in 1982? Became. Was he slapped in '83? They slammed. Was the Treaty of December 30, 1922 annulled in 1991? Canceled. Directly, as on the poster: "We will fulfill everything bequeathed by Lenin!". What is this mysticism?

— And this one? How is it? Client! Where did he come from? I almost moaned.

Vasily Lukich lovingly stroked the gold jubilee medal on his lapel.

Do you understand the difference between time and eternity? he asked. Have you read Einstein?

Of course, I didn't read Einstein, but I asked Lukic, starting to stutter again:

— V-Vasily Lukich, have you read Einstein?

"We studied it at the academy," the veteran replied, "we tried to combine his theory of relativity with the slogan "Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin will live forever!"

- And what did you get?

"I will answer you with the words of Einstein," Lukich laughed. "If I had time to explain this to you, it would take forever before you understood it!"

## DRUNK DISPUTE

I remember exactly that it was December 21, 1995. Finding myself that day on the street where Vasily Lukich lived, I decided to go to him, fortunately, the reason seemed convincing to me: on this day, many honored Chekist veterans celebrated the birthday of the Father of all nations - Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin.

"Surely," I thought, "Lukic will please me with some other story in the genre of socialist surrealism. Well, for example, - I dreamed, - he will finally tell how Matryona Ivanovna nurtured the leader's twins or how she wrote the testament of the real Stalin.

I stood in front of a shop window with an intriguing sign "Sheikh", wondering which of the strong drinks would bring the least harm to the veteran's health. I obviously didn't have enough for "Absolute" at the price of fifty thousand rubles per bottle, "Kremlyovskaya" did not inspire confidence, "Moskovskaya" was suspiciously cheap.

My attention was drawn to a sticker showing a fierce-looking Asian brandishing either a stick or a sword, and the name, deciphered by me as "Tibetan Nectar", put an end to doubts. In a nearby stall, they weighed me a couple of cucumbers, tomatoes and several onions. I did not forget to buy the Chekist's favorite delicacy - lemon waffles.

- Who's there? Vasily Lukich's unexpectedly angry voice came from behind the door when I pressed the bell button.

- Vasily Lukich, it's me, did you recognize it? Passed by, decided to go.

- Why did not you call? grunted the old man, letting me into the hallway, "maybe I have some kind of guest, or am I, for example, going to visit?"

— Lukich, don't be angry, I'll be here for a minute. Here, I came to congratulate you, hold it.

I pulled out a bottle and vegetables from my briefcase and handed it to the veteran.

- Surely you are celebrating the anniversary of Stalin!

- Well, I note, but what about you?

I thought I'd celebrate with you. This day is rarely celebrated today.

- I have a guest today. Former colleague, came from afar. Sent a telegram. I'm sitting here waiting.

- That's it, Lukich, I'm leaving. Sorry again for not being on time.

- What are you, like a red-haired girl: "Sorry, sorry!" What is there? Came - so go. Maybe it's for the best that he didn't call. And I would have called, maybe I would have told you that, I'm sorry, they say, I'm busy. You wouldn't have gone. And so, then, you will be a guest without a telegram.

- I'm the uninvited guest, it turns out. They say: "An uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar."

- You're drinking. So it's better. My weather forecaster - a colleague - will also be uninvited.

What is a weather forecaster? Did you work for the weather service? I began to question Lukich, obviously out of place, "you didn't tell me anything about the weather service.

- What kind of weather service is there, - the old man waved his hand, - he worked in the forecasting department. He dealt with different statistics, but I don't think he knew which one. But he loved to talk. Yes, and he has all the work - tables, graphs and chatter at meetings. Predicted anything. And croaked in addition. Behind his eyes he was also called Karkusha. And when he croaked that Semichastny would have a hard time - this is when Svetlanka fled beyond the cordon - they began to say directly in the eyes - Karkun. How many times did it happen that because of his croaking, the department was either deprived of bonuses or left without a distributor. And it happened even worse - some people went to Turkestan according to the order to correct regional indicators.

Talking about his guest, Lukich wasted no time. A bottle of "Tibetan nectar" took its place on the table next to "Stolichnaya", cucumbers and tomatoes were cut, onions were peeled.

- There is no extra chair, - the veteran muttered, returning from the kitchen with a battered stool, - and you will drink from a cup. The glass broke.

"Lukich," I suggested, when he calmed down and sat down at the table, "let's commemorate the leader. Still, you had many joys and worries from being close to him. There was hardly anyone left who knew him better than you. Is that Svetlana Iosifovna. Also, probably, commemorates his father today. That's fate, tell me!

- Whose destiny is it? If Comrade Stalin, so he, to know, was written in the family.

- Yes, I'm talking about Svetlana's fate, Lukich.

- Yes perishing fate, as fate! One word - the unfortunate woman was. Also remember is not a sin.

- So let's remember until the weatherman has come.

— And what about Karkun? He, too, will not refuse to commemorate Comrade Stalin. Okay, let's pour it. Let's change both.

"Yes, Svetlana is still alive, Lukich," I corrected until he knocked over his faceted one.

- What kind of life is there! She gave her soul to God during her lifetime. In the monastery, I heard, registered. Consider that you made an incarnation during your lifetime. Okay, let the mattress be her feather bed!

— Lukic, how do you like the results of the elections? I asked him, crunching a cucumber and listening to the movement of nectar through the esophagus. According to the reaction of the walls of numerous

pipelines of my body, I could unmistakably determine where the newly taken life-giving poison was produced, under whatever sticker it appeared. "Tibetan nectar" was clearly of foreign origin. Before I had time to express my opinion, Lukic got ahead of me and categorically concluded:

- "Royal" on a swan. "Royal" is Dutch, the quinoa is ours. The bottle is Hungarian, and the sticker - he pushed the bottle closer, took out his glasses and looked at the rim of the motley glossy label for a long time - from the First Exemplary Printing House of the Mosoblsovprof. - Parasites, - he grunted, - they even left the old form of a piece of paper. Do you remember, about twenty years ago, they released a trial batch of extra strong vodka "The Party is our helmsman"? It had the same sticker. Saboteurs!

— Lukich, make no mistake, there was no such vodka.

"And if I show you the bottle now?" No, the bottle was drunk a long time ago. When the party threw out the main slogan: "The sports and cultural complex is the spirit of the times," remember? Or was it later - when Gorbachev fluttered out of the chair of the General Secretary? I do not remember. Saved the sticker. I have many different packages and stickers. Everyone thinks that the soap "In Lenin's Places" is a joke. This is no anecdote. There was such a batch of soap. And toilet water "Smells of Ilyich" was. There were jokers then, not only now: "Tibetan nectar"!

"Go ahead, show me," I waved my hand, pouring another portion of swan tincture.

Lukich did not manage to get the sticker, - a long bell rang. He closed the closet door and turned around.

- Then you'll see. Now shut up. Let the guest settle in. Let's see what he breathes, what he will croak about.

A minute later, Vasily Lukich returned to the room, letting a short, dense man, somewhat reminiscent of our mayor, go forward. He appeared to be about sixty years old. Seeing me, he stopped, uneasily, even, perhaps, guiltily smiled at the owner. Then he slowly turned his face towards me. The restlessness in his eyes vanished, replaced by soft, velvety benevolence.

"Come on, come on, come in, all your own," the host spread his arms wide and introduced me to the guest, "this is from the editorial office of the Red Star," and this, he continued, is Vladlen Borisovich, a retired colonel, so to speak, or, maybe you were inadvertently promoted to general? Lukich turned to his guest, waiting for an answer.

- Just wait, they'll do it. Pasha will soon become a generalissimo.

He glanced at the table, rubbed his hands, and asked meticulously:

- So, comrades ... or gentlemen, as you please, what are we celebrating?

"We are waiting for you, but while we were waiting, we drank to Himself." Join. Do you still use? Lukich pushed a glass towards his guest, and as he poured it, he said, nodding at the bottle:

- Tibetan monks, look, they sent. It invigorates and inspires hope in the vessels.

"Wait a minute, friends," the colonel got up from his chair, "I almost forgot. I brought a local drink from Voronezh. And some food.

While the guest was busy in the hallway with his luggage, Lukic leaned over to me and said quietly, almost in a whisper:

- Do not be offended that I made you from the "Red Star". That's better.

I didn't understand why it's better from the Red Star than, for example, from Pravda, but I kept silent and nodded my head in agreement - the owner knows better.

The guest returned with a liter bottle and two packages. From one he took out several fatty smoked fish, in the other there was a large Voronezh gingerbread with icing. The label of the bottle showed a rocket soaring into a purple sky, a bright orange sunflower, and a portrait of an emaciated man wearing a laurel wreath. The inscription read: "Space special."

- Don't you know? he asked me affectionately, thrusting the label right under his nose. I sniffed it, but there was no smell.

"Don't sniff, but look," he laughed.

I stared blankly at the sunflower, trying to tie it to the rocket, then at the portrait of a skinny man in a wreath, but, try as I might, I could not guess which of the gardeners or astronauts I knew could belong to the face placed on the label.

"Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky," the guest smiled and offered to drink to the meeting.

We finished the nectar, and a colleague, without eating, poured a whole glass of Voronezh Cosmic.

"Just tasting, tasting, or what shall we drink to?" the guest asked.

"Let's try it first," suggested Vassily Lukich, took two sips, stared up at the ceiling, and grinned approvingly:

- "Royal" on the plantain. The "piano" is Belgian, the plantain is ours, the sticker ... - Lukich did not even bother to look at it - from the Kaluga printing house of the Voronezh Regional Committee Manager. Guessed?

"Well, Sherlock Holmes," the guest grunted admiringly and laughed. - Tell me how you got there.

- What is there to achieve. When you were fighting for a monopoly with the managers from the Central Committee, I was asked by former colleagues to help them understand some of the intricacies of the work of party printing houses. Understood and reported. "A liter of alcohol, I say, brings you three thousand clean, and a kilogram of labels, I continue, gives your competitors one hundred thousand. And when, I say, dollars and pounds learn to print, your orders for stickers will turn up their noses."

The guest looked at Lukich with disbelief.

- What are you staring at? - the owner grinned, - didn't your eyes see further than alcohol? Okay, let's not continue the topic. The editor won't understand," added Lukich, and took a large, fat fish as a sample.

"Good fish," I shook my head, "starlet, it seems.

- No, - the Voronezh guest objected, - you are far from Vasily, - a mistake! There was a shooter in the milk, as my great-grandmother would say.

"By the way," Lukich raised his head at me, "you ask Borisych who his great-grandmother is, by the way, Borisych, is she still alive?"

- Do not anger the Almighty, Vasily! She also died with you. When did you retire? IN

fifty-fifth? She is a year later.

They were silent. Poured a little. Great-grandmother was remembered.

- And what do you want? the guest took the floor again. She was ninety when she died. For half a hundred years she toiled under the tsar, played tricks in hard labor, then for how many years - as a grandmother already - she received future dzerzhinyats into the world and brought them out to people until they settled in Voronezh. I was born - she was already drawn to sixty.

- Yes, you ask, ask about Esther ... how about her father, I forgot, - Vasily Lukich turned to the guest.

- Yes, I forgot myself, - Vladlen Borisovich frowned, - or maybe I didn't know. And she herself, in my opinion, did not know. Come on, Vasily, - the guest was embarrassed, - then somehow. Let's better talk about today's affairs. It's time to decide. Did you follow the elections?

- And why follow them, - the veteran waved them off, - they already got it. Follow - do not follow, there's no point. There is no order. The President somehow spoke, made a forecast. Yes, it's also awkward. It's a serious matter, but he waved his hands on the move, grunted to his cellmates, or whatever they were, who roamed around with cameras in front of him: "Chernomyrdin - twenty percent, Zyuganov - ten", and even before saying these ten, he considered that something in the mind. And how it happened. Probably, the voters have already forgotten how to count in their minds, or the voters misunderstood him.

Lukich shook his head mournfully and continued:

"Even Khrushchev used to hit the table with his fist, not only would they lay out interest on the table for him, they would fill up the country with corn. Do you remember, Borisych?

- How not to remember, Vasily. I remember how the President once got on a tank. It was a bad time. How many heart attacks we had then, but still admired! I didn't finish the job then, but he, oh, how bright it was. The organs would have dispersed - no one would have had time to utter a word. Everyone is already behind bars, remember. He put his people on the army. The party has almost gone underground. Then we were sitting at a general's dacha, throwing bones: will he declare a state of emergency in Moscow or not? It turned out - will announce. It was such a chill in my chest! All the developments in the dachas and burrows were stuffed.

And what about the bones? - Vasily Lukich asked the tipsy guest, - you are a professional forecaster. I would have calculated for my comrades the likelihood of an emergency and all sorts of consequences. Now, they don't throw bones, I suppose? You, probably, did not follow the elections with bones. Statistics made and croaked? Admit it, did you hit the apple or the milk?

— Vladlen Borisovich. - I entered into the conversation, - I feel that the results are in your hands. The Central Election Commission is dark. Enlighten us. Lukic didn't really follow the course either. I was not up to it. We have a job - you know what. How do you evaluate the results?

- And you? - Vladlen Borisovich answered the question with a question.

- I don't believe them! I blurted out, resolutely bringing the bottle of cosmic drink.

- Here you are absolutely right! the colonel perked up. They falsified the results. Almost at every polling station we had our own people Reported to the center every hour. Only ours were allowed to count the votes.

— How do you know all this, Vladlen Borisovich? Are you the real chairman?

Central Election Commission.

- No, it was their Central Election Committee. We had an Extraordinary Commission of Commissioners for Elections - ChKUvy, if abbreviated.

— Where did you report to? Which center?

- I personally reported to the party leadership, or, to be more precise, to our people in the party leadership. By emergency line of computer communication. Since July, the network has been created. I'm listening on TV that the Communist Party has spent the least money on the election campaign, I'm laughing. Sixty thousand "notebooks" alone were bought. Count! Almost all authorized persons were provided with satellite communications - add it! How many thousands of people have been trained to use this infection, again costs. Thank God, there were enough enthusiasts to work on a voluntary basis. How many communist subbotniks were held under the noses of the authorities!

- Lukich, - I turn to the owner, - do you hear what feats your colleagues perform? And you are sitting in retirement and enjoying TV series! What would it be for, do you think?

- Yes, I already thought about it. After all, I was also offered at one time, after the President dispersed the Supreme Council, to work. And from Sterligov came, and Ampilovites, and Khazbulatchiks, there were even from Kryuchkov himself. The leaders were still in Matrosskaya Tishina, and they were already thinking about revenge.

- Vasily, and you, I see, as always - in the center of events. And, as always, on the sly. Oh yes silent! - Vladlen Borisovich shook his head, rubbed his hands and poured into the glasses and into my cup to the brim.

"You shouldn't be mixing Tibetan with Voronezh," I remarked to the weatherman, but in response he only laughed and turned to Lukich:

- Vasily, maybe we will reveal the secret to a friend from the newspaper?

The owner grinned skeptically and, waving his hand, grumbled:

- What a secret, if all the newspapers were ringing about this six months ago. Is it not from your submission, Karkun? The President has not yet signed the secret decree, and its text is already being scattered all over the country from unidentified helicopters.

- Basil! The editor of a newspaper, as a rule, does not know what is printed in newspapers. Especially in his own. He has no time to read others - he himself has just admitted - but he edits his own, but does not read. By the way, there is an opinion that your newspaper is too straightforward. The question of changing the leadership has already been discussed in the Central Committee. But we decided it was too early. We will do this as part of an all-Union campaign to improve federal assistance to the media. So be aware. But for now, what I said is not for publication.

"There you are, Karkoon!" Everything is clear with you. Stop croaking. Let's drink to the fact that your predictions are not justified.

We drank. It seems that Lukic, like me, drank without much pleasure. Only the representative, grunting, drained the glass in two gulps and, without taking a bite, turned to the owner:

- Vasily, it seems that you do not fully know the secrets of the "Royal" either. Now, of course, we can talk.

The train left. Look for fistula - everything is sewn-covered! After all, everything was spoiled by the former managers of the old Central Committee and regional committees, who got the alcoholic beverage industry according to the order. We didn't particularly interfere with them, as long as they regularly paid tribute. But greed ruined the fraers.

At some point, they felt the weakness of the government and for ... Well, it's not about money, they bought the right to privatize the main factories. Further - more: they created something like the All-Russian Alcohol Alliance and decided that they were holding everyone in the country in their drunken arms! They stopped reckoning with us, money transfers slowed down, alcohol began to pay off. Not otherwise - they also decided to get us drunk, although non-payments were blamed on high taxes, on depreciation, on racketeering, ha ha!

The commissioner even trembled from the peals of drunken laughter. When I looked inquiringly at Lukich, he grimaced and only waved his hand - they say, let him grind.

- Well, cretins, as they were idiots, so they remained. Once, at a briefing, one of our former chief ideologists instructed them: "You," he says, "understand that the red directors are not so much evidence of belonging to our favorite party as a hint of your propensity to drink - the color of your noses betrays over your head." And they laugh in response, well, just like me. "Take," their boss persuades them, "an example from comrade Zyuganov, his nose is always white, and not from the president ... - then the ideologist stumbled ... - Clinton, whose nose, although white, is not from sobriety, but from makeup" .

Vladlen Borisovich, inflamed by the drunk "Royal" and the realization of his significance, continued:

- I shared the idea with the authorities to hand over the entire alliance to the people of Gaidar, when I calculated that their profit is not less than three government budgets. Far-sighted people stopped, they predicted something else ...

"Vladlen Borisovich," I tried to turn the conversation in a different direction, "you have already mentioned several times: "they have ceased to reckon with us," "our people." So who is "you"? Zyuganovites? Patriots? Sovereigns?

- Do you hate? - for some reason, the representative answered in an interrogative form. - In my opinion, everyone, except for the senile waving red flags at rallies, understood that all the groups you listed are just a set-up of healthy forces that will govern the state after the elections.

- Then let me clarify what kind of "healthy forces" are, and why do they need a "set-up" in the person of Zyuganov?

- Sweet man! exclaimed the colonel, "does it seem to me that it's time to disperse your newspaper, if you don't understand such things?"

- And what about our newspaper? I wondered.

- And despite the fact that, although your direction is fundamentally correct, it is too straightforward. Orientation should also sometimes be slightly camouflaged.

Leaning back in his chair and waving his fish head, he lectured:

"Imagine that we will go out to the election stands and start saying what we think. We are a straight people. More like a swan. And then we see how he has to restrain himself. Lukich," he turned to the owner, "tell me!

"I won't say anything!" said the veteran. Did you hear the question? Answer me, don't mess with me!



- In short, so, - the colonel concentrated, - who will go to vote for the All-Russian zone? Do you understand? True, we now use the term reservation. Not in the sense, of course, that is attached to this word behind the cordon. Explain for a long time. People may not understand if there is not enough time. But in practice, everything will become clear much faster. Understood?

Of course, I did not understand anything, but it became scary. Although he understood that the forecaster was drunk. But after all, every day confirms to us the saying: "What is on the mind of a sober man is on the tongue of a drunk." Pouring "cosmic" into the glass of the commissioner, I dared to remind him that he still did not answer me what kind of "healthy forces" Vladlen Borisovich represents here today.

- Those who really ruled the country since the time of Menzhinsky, - like a sledgehammer on concrete, Vladlen Borisovich hammered me in the brain.

— Menzhinsky? I repeated dazedly. — And not Lenin?

— Lenina? the commissioner asked in surprise and burst out laughing. - If you said - Stalin, you could argue! But Lenin himself was ruled by the Germans, Latvians and Jews. And he was only the most nimble one! When we slammed it...

- What are you talking about, Karkun! Vassily Lukich slapped the table. - When did you slap him? Yes, you are tired of him, and he left you. You know where. If you don't know, then you shouldn't know. I propose to pour out for the health of Vladimir Ilyich!

- Do not blaspheme, Vasily! Ready to remember, but I will not drink to health. Although they slammed him, he worked his way. Raise the cup!

Vasily Lukich defiantly overturned the glass, got up from the table and left the room. I was afraid that he would come back with some named pistol and shoot his former colleague.

The commissioner put aside the drink, leaned towards me and began to broadcast again:

- And he left, I know where - they went to his mausoleum, and since then he has been looking at us with reproach: we did not cope with our task. I had to disperse across the country. They went to the people, to the economy, to politics, to the administration. They shared their experience with each other. But now we know thoroughly what the people want. We know the mood of the people, we know their aspirations.

"As you were, Karkusha, you remain so," I heard Lukich's voice from the hallway.

"Eagle of the steppe, dashing Cossack," the commissioner sang out of tune to him from the room.

- Not an eagle, but a plucked crow named Karkusha. Lukich sat down in his seat and nodded his head mournfully.

I didn't want the veterans' principled dispute to gain momentum.

So what is the statistics. Vladlen Borisovich? I interrupted both.

- And according to statistics, it turns out that ninety percent of our people want a whip, they want to punish the guilty, they want the people to be ruled with an iron fist.

"In tight irons," I added, believing that the commissioner was joking.

"The Sterligovs," he corrected me.

— Dangerously clever, Karkun! exclaimed Vasily Lukich. His face became hard. "They will stab you and not even open a criminal case.

- Don't worry, Vasily! said the Colonel. - Who will cut it? They cut only ours. They won't kill theirs. Feeska sees the check from afar, - Vladlen Borisovich laughed and, winking, turned to me:

- It's not a secret for you, is it?

To be honest, it was hard for me to argue. I knew that our newspaper sometimes received materials, one might say, ready-made criminal cases, but for some reason they disappeared without a trace. Even in the register. But we have already got used to this, believing that it is not our business to deal with dismantling and exposing high-ranking military men. Sometimes they even joked when some general or colonel mentioned in the materials was sent to Chechnya: "They sent them to the slaughter."

"Vladlen Borisovich," I stubbornly returned to the path I was interested in, "are you also ready to get an iron hand on your ass?"

"We will not receive, but distribute," he answered confidently.

"Will the ninety percent who want whips also give out?" Then who will receive?

"It is important to put the question correctly here," said the commissioner thoughtfully. - After all, we didn't ask if Ivan Ivanovich wants, for example, to lie down under the whip. The question is formulated in the Chekist way: "Does Ivan Ivanovich think that Ivan Nikiforovich did not always give a fundamental assessment of certain actions that as a result led the country to the current state?" And what do you think? Ivan Ivanovich, of course, thinks so. Second question: "Does Ivan Ivanovich think that Ivan Nikiforovich must be strictly questioned according to the law?" "Of course, it is necessary," Ivan Ivanovich considers.

- But this is a mockery of Ivan Ivanovich! I couldn't resist.

"But Ivan Ivanovich, by the way, doesn't think so," the forecaster retorted and continued:

"Of course, we didn't ask Ivan Nikiforitch whether he wanted whips or not.

- Did you convince him that Ivan Ivanovich deserves a whip?

- Yes you? So primitively we do not work now. We ask Ivan Nikiforovich, for example, about General Korzhakov, - Vladlen Borisovich grinned, muffling my amazement, which did not have time to take shape in words, with a movement of his hand, - if we asked about Ivan Ivanovich, we would hardly get more than sixty percent. The church is doing a lot for us. Television exudes a religious dope. Conscience, unfortunately, wakes up among the people. We misunderstood this. Zyuganov was not stopped in time. He has already announced that conscience and faith in communism can coexist during the election campaign.

My head was spinning. I imagined how the respected Vladlen Borisovich was carrying this nonsense from the election platform, and the tipsy electorate, waving portraits of Lenin, Stalin, Zyuganov and Christ, were chanting: "Death to Ivan Ivanovich! Death to Ivan Nikiforitch! To the wall of General Korzhakov! Stop! About Korzhakov, perhaps, they will not shout. I would, at least, be offended by Vladlen Borisovich and beat him a couple of times with a rubber truncheon. Nevertheless, I was terribly interested in what Ivan Nikiforovich answered the question about Korzhakov.

"And everyone is ready to condemn Korzhakov, except for the President and General Barsukov. I heard that in some places he is called the life cup-bearer, - without blinking an eye, the commissioner hurried to evaporate.

— Did you ask about Gaidar? I asked. I was interested in what the “healthy forces” think about the man who launched the flywheel of reforms, against whom the entire nomenklatura, both old and new, took up arms.

“No,” Vladlen Borisovich said firmly. — Gaidar prepared the ground for us to consolidate. He himself went to the slaughter. A brave man. Although almost everyone pities him. Especially women. His path was dangerous for us. That's why we got together quickly. Whatever we did to replace him with Chernomyrdin. Still, Viktor Stepanovich is not such a dashing person.

"Borisych, aren't you tired of it?" How many bones have already been ground! Take a break, - interrupted the forecaster-analyst Vasily Lukich. - Maybe put a tea?

It seemed to me that Vladlen Borisovich did not even hear his colleague.

“If Gaidar had managed to release the land from our hands, to sell it into private ownership, even for the thirtieth harvest in the next century, we would have been a khan. After all, this is our “exclusive”, as they say now, electorate! Beggars landless collective farmers and urban shantytown. Yes, even criminals who are idle in the zones. And then here the grandmother said in two. Many do not support us. It is believed that within the framework of today's lawlessness, the field of their activities has expanded significantly.

Vladlen Borisovich put it this way: “within the limits of lawlessness,” and, just in case, I clung to this verbal find as a possible title for my future publication.

- Vladlen Borisovich, - I was distracted from my thoughts, - it turns out that a third of the country, that is, "shantytown" and landless peasants, let's not count criminals, vote for you, for the "healthy forces" of the security agencies, and not for the Communist Party of the Russian Federation ?

- That's just the point, that actually their voices will get to us. And Zyuganov is just a convenient companion for us. Let him lie what is written to him while he is free. And when he becomes the President, he will sing differently. And if he doesn't sing, we'll send him to the mausoleum, like his predecessor.

“Listen, Borisych, stop bullying Ilyich,” Vasily Lukich was indignant again. "You don't realize what you've been up to." On two towers - in the good old days. And according to the new ones - for three disappearances without initiating a criminal case.

“Don't scare me with a criminal case. Basil! I'm not afraid of him! Someone to excite.

“Listen here,” Lukich interrupted his colleague, “I'm not scaring you with a criminal case, but with the fact that your body will be listed as missing.” Forever! Understood? And the soul of a missing person wanders for a very long time until it incarnates into another body. Understood? And if so, then it is forcibly pushed into the baobab. Understood?

How paralyzed Vladlen Borisovich! His eyes popped out of their sockets, his mouth turned from a pretty oval into an unformed hole, he leaned forward all over and stammered. While he hiccupped in a helpless state of extreme amazement, Vasily Lukich finished off his colleague:

- Admit it, who authorized you to carry such nonsense? The fact that Zyuganov sings from your voice is understandable; the fact that you are transplanting half of the country is also, so to speak, a fact that does not require expertise; the fact that the party is your helpless theoretical detachment - everyone will understand this even before the elections. You have unmeasured money. It is only narrow-minded people who think that the “gold of the party” was disposed of by the party. I know who was in charge of that money. Karkusha, you would do your job, but don't be smart! Draw your goose distributions and dyspepsia.

Lukich coughed heavily and waved his hand. I drank the rest of the king's potion on the plantain. Stopped talking. I did not expect from a veteran that he could shoot such deadly bursts. "From the stomach - like a fan," I recalled a phrase from some samizdat book.

"Calm down, Vasily," Vladlen Borisovich said unexpectedly quietly. "I just don't understand why you say "you" to us. Are you not with us?"

He leaned over to Lukich and put his arm around his neck, as if he was about to strangle him. Vasily Lukich pushed him aside with his hand.

"By the way," the commissioner turned to me, throwing his elbows on the table and almost knocking a plate with fish tails and skeletons on the floor, "there are no "goose" distributions. The distributions are Gaussian. And there is no dyspepsia, that is, there is, - he hiccupped and finished the phrase with a slurred tongue: - Dyspepsia is such a disease. And the variance is the deviation from the mean. However, it is also a disease.

He stood up and staggered towards the door. Then he stopped and stared blankly at me.

"Stargazer," he babbled indistinctly, pointing his index fingers forward at me, "bang-bang!" He jerked his arms, struggled to keep his balance and squeezed out of himself: - Tell me, where should I urinate?

I jumped up from the stool to escort him to the toilet, but Vasily Lukich beat me to it.

"Pee underneath you, Karkusha," he said wearily to the commissioner with a squeamish grimace, "everything will flow into your boots, and your soul will be warm and damp when they are led to the execution."

Lukich approached the colonel, but the latter stepped back and, as thoughtfully as his badly controlled language would allow, recited:

"Parallel lines don't intersect, but they always go hand in hand, remember that, stargazer. Hold me, Vasily.

They went out into the hallway. Hand in hand - a tragic past and a circus future. And the viewer was left alone with an unfinished bottle of Stolichnaya and leftovers of smoked whitefish.

The owner returned to the room, sat down on his chair and pushed aside the overturned glass.

"Lukich," I turned to the veteran, "what a dispute your wino has ruined!" And I was dreaming.

— A dispute with the Organs? Are you crazy? He told you what they do. Alcohol is knocked out of the party farm. By the way, - the veteran nodded towards the hallway, - he really participated in the operation "Royal Drink". After all, no one touched the scientific and economic personnel of the Organs. They slipped without soap through all the reorganizations - from the KGB to the FSK. Virtually lossless. When Ilyich refused them money, they rushed to the former party managers. And they showed them a fig with butter. They got fat on the soldering of the population, the class consciousness became dull. Or they decided that they would live without the Organs.

Then these - from "Felix" - opened the strategic stocks of alcohol, which had been stored since the time of Mikhail Sergeyevich's anti-alcohol campaign, for a whole month they drove him across the cordon. And went to Russia "Royal" of all stripes - from American to Luxembourg. Undermined outright the local party-alcohol industry. Those had to back down. And when some materials on the old case of "Samtrest" were handed over to the prosecutor's office - they kept them for so many years, even from the unforgettable Yuri Vladimirovich, -

party members had to back down. They understood that they were sitting on the hook of the Organs along with all the giblets in the face of secretaries - from the district committee to the Central Committee.

They had to collect their raspberries. Whether "Anna Karenina" was saddled, or "Nadezhda Krupskaya" - I don't remember. They did come to an agreement. We decided to return the monopoly to the state out of harm's way, the "healthy forces" stopped driving the "Royal" of local production because of the cordon. And to celebrate, the ship was sold to some dummy joint venture.

Vasily Lukich fell silent. Then suddenly he turned towards the hallway and shouted loudly:

— Hey, Borisych! Did you drown there?

There was no answer. The veteran became worried and got up from his chair.

— Vladlen Borisovich! I shouted and got up.

We both fell silent. From behind the door came a grumbling, the indistinct response of a drunken commissioner. Lukic sat down again and continued his story:

- That's how they work, And you say - a dispute. In this whole case, the bad thing is that they indiscriminately merged everything together from different repositories, without even reading the instructions and recommendations for use. And there were alcohols oh what different. with chemical additives. To relax the psyche, for aggressiveness, sleeping pills, vasoconstrictors and all sorts of others. Now different services are trying to check alcohol. But no longer for this reason. There were, allegedly, attempts to bring poisoned drink from Chechnya. Stopped. On the table, they say, they put Dudayev. Explain what a boomerang is. Dudayev laughed and replied that his people were religious, and they were not in danger of being poisoned. But he promised to investigate and report back. He said that it was not a man's business to turn the drink of life into a weapon of terror.

"Lukic," I interrupted the veteran's alcohol theme, "is there really some truth in the revelations and forecasts of your forecaster?" How do you think?

- What should I think? I know without it. All revelations are pure truth. But he didn't say everything. Not allowed. Remember how he once mentioned - "reservation". And he began to get better, which, they say, is not in the sense that it is understood in the West. He will not say anything about this development. And he will say - he will disappear without a trace!

What about forecasts? You know, you're a historian. Shake your brains. They also use stamps that Ilyich riveted to them for all occasions. Remember what the leader of the world proletariat did in 1819 and 1919. Yes, and then...

Lukic curled up the thumb on his left hand and began:

- Expropriated everything that lay badly, for the benefit of the world revolution - this is the time! Sold everyone who bought it, and vice versa — that's two! He created the organs of terror and extortion and provided them with work - these are three! These are only great things, I'm not talking about small things. It was the last great deed that knocked him down. When I came to my senses and realized that I had lost, I asked to go to the zone. Here the Organs crushed everyone under them. Here they are, - Vasily Lukich pointed with his finger in the direction of the place where the weather forecaster came to his senses, - now they believe that they managed to successfully cross a snake and a hedgehog with the prospect of getting from each mating, or mating, as you prefer, not two meters, but two kilometers of barbed wire.

Comrade Stalin managed to maneuver for a long time - that's why he and Stalin! He opened a second front for them - to work not only against the population, but also against themselves.

"And against the party and the army," I added.

"The army and the party are the same population," the wise veteran corrected me and shouted again:

"Karkusha, wake up, we'll drink to Organa."

"For the unity of the Organs and the people," came from the toilet, then the sound of running water was heard.

— Lukich, forgive me for the indiscreet question: are you really with them too? For some reason, I asked almost in a whisper.

Lukich looked at me for a long time, sighed, poured the remains of plantain into a bottle of quinoa, handed it to me and said:

- Hold on. You'll have a hangover tomorrow. You already asked me this question. And I already answered you. Remember: a woman is allowed to repeat in the same thing - "do you love me?", And a man is prescribed to answer - "so exactly." Every time. Remember? It used to be that the party regularly demanded to sign in love, and the people answered "yes". The party is no longer a woman. She also has to dress up in different wigs. Yes, it's too late. You can't hide sclerosis and senile sand under a wig.

The first train I took to get to Karacharovo headed for Petushki. When the doors slammed shut at the Hammer and Sickle station, I opened my briefcase, intending to look through the newspaper I had bought that afternoon. I was struck by a bottle with the remnants of the "royal" drinks. I took it out, looked around and, remembering Venichka Erofeev, laughed and "immediately drank"

## SEVASTOPOL EXPLOSION

1

Gradually, my relationship with Vasily Lukich reached such a stage that I turned into his man for him. He even called me on the phone himself, figuring out where I had disappeared to. At the same time, it turned out that I had not been with him for a whole week!

He became much more frank and grumbled less often about the fact that I was not supposed to know this or that, and because of me he did not want unnecessary trouble.

One day, Lukich handed me a medium-sized cardboard box containing his photographs, mostly post-war ones.

There were very few pre-war ones, and their quality was such that it was difficult to say for sure whether Lukich was depicted on them or not.

"Yes, here he is, me," the veteran said with conviction, poking his finger into a blurry spot on which only a Budyonovka and a horse could be identified.

I politely agreed and asked:

"Were you a cavalryman, Lukich?"

- I was not a cavalryman, - Lukich was indignant, - and as for the horse, then, firstly, the photograph is not a horse, but a mare named "Iskra". At first it was called "Lenin's spark", but

then the authorities ordered the word "Leninskaya" to be removed. And only Iskra remained. This is a means of transport. Like a motorcycle or a car in modern times. What do you think? I had to move thirty miles to Moscow from my zone and back on foot? So he rode the Iskra, and sometimes he harnessed it to the britzka when Ilyich was somewhere drove.

- Did you take Ilyich somewhere else? I ask.

"Everything happened," Lukich dismisses, clearly demonstrating that he does not want to talk about this topic today.

Among other photographs, to my great surprise, I found one in which Vasily Lukich was captured in the form of a captain of the first rank against the background of a monument to the lost ships in Sevastopol. It was something! A bottomless box of surprises - that's who Vasily Lukich was!

"Lukich," I yelled, "did you manage to serve in the Navy, too?"

On the back of the photograph was the date: December 6, 1955, Sevastopol.

- It was business! Lukich admitted. "Just not for very long. Only three months. And even then you can't say that I served. He just dressed up in a naval uniform so as not to stand out too much. Like in a camouflage. In Sevastopol, anyone who is not dressed in a naval uniform is looked askance, with suspicion, and everyone strives to detain such a person for verification of documents and identification. The people there are very scared.

- How did you get there? I'm curious. "After all, as far as I know, you, Lukich, were torn from the organs in 1955, and you worked as a lecturer in the Knowledge Society.

"That's right," Lukich agrees, "only they didn't turn me out of the organs, as you put it, but transferred me to the reserve, leaving my certificate and the right to carry weapons. True, I did not really use the last right in the old days. Why weapons when you're on your own territory? On their own territory, the only weapon should be revolutionary legitimacy. This legality can be so shy that no weapon will succeed! You know how many people have been transferred by this very "social legality"! What kind of gun can you think of in such conditions.

"All right," I say, "you are right, as always, Lukich. So how did you end up in the Navy?"

- It happened, if my memory serves me, somewhere before the November holidays of the fifty-fifth year. I have always loved to celebrate these holidays, and I still do. No matter how you treat the October Revolution, but, as Lenin used to say, one thing is certain - October marked the beginning of a fundamentally new era in the history of mankind. Whether this era was good or quite the opposite is a matter of political tastes and views. From what point to look. From mine, for example: well, who would I be if not for the October Revolution. Some gopnik. And so he rose to the rank of colonel, solved tasks of national importance. So, for me, October is a more than positive phenomenon. Of course, those who have been spanked or forced to sit in the zones all their lives have a different point of view; but true democracy is precisely composed of different points of view.

"So, I remember, I bought a bottle of brandy," Lukich continued his story, "and I was going to join the company of the same semi-retired "operas" like myself, so that at the festive table, as they say, to remember our youth in combat within the allowed to disclosure. Well, drink, of course. I'm going, so in the pre-holiday mood home

and - the door has not yet been opened - I hear my phone ringing. Well, I think the pre-holiday congratulations have begun.

So I thought, but already by the way the phone squealed, it was clear that someone was getting to me via special communications. I wasn't happy at all. The times were confusing. And a year has not yet passed, as the state security agencies were defeated, and their leadership was exterminated without trial or investigation. Purges and arrests continued. They could have gotten to me. Just like that - to put one more tick somewhere.

It is now - in the days of your circus democracy - that the entire backbone of the former organs is in a benevolent-spiteful state. Who manages the bank, who has seized the industry, who is putting together the militant organization of the current communists and can not wait until they call Zyuganov to take decisive action. Yes, the times come...

"Lukic," I interrupted the veteran, "we'll talk about the present times sometime later, but now I want you not to be distracted from the naval theme. So, someone got to you via special communications. Continue.

Yes, I felt it. So, with some emotional excitement, I pick up the phone and hear the voice of one of my colleagues, also a colonel, who mysteriously disappeared from the organs on the very eve of Comrade Stalin's death.

"Lukic," he says, "with the attacker.

"And you, too," I reply.

- How is your health?

The issue of health in our business has never been idle. Especially if he was addressed to a man whom many in the Lubyanka commemorated in a whisper as having been shot.

"Thank God, everything is fine," he announces in a somewhat muffled voice, "how about you?"

- Also, pah, pah, pah, everything is fine, - I confess, - thanks for the congratulations. Sorry, I just got here. Haven't even undressed yet. And I need to run away.

Are you still running? It's good, he says. - It's good that you didn't undress. In five minutes a car will come for you. Stop running.

"The car," I ask, somehow stupidly, "where does the car come from?"

- You'll find out later, - answers my acquaintance, - but for now, go downstairs. She should already drive up. Black Chevy.

And hung up.

"Here," I think, "there was no sadness! Guess now: they won't take it."

I had a briefcase with everything I needed for a long time - "if they take it right away so as not to knock around," as the song says. Again, I think, take it with you or not? Decided to take. Whom will he interfere with? And with a briefcase, I myself will look more impressive. I take, therefore, I have my "doprovsky" briefcase and go down.

Indeed, there is a black Chevrolet at the entrance. It doesn't look like I think they've come to take it. "Chevrolet" for such a need would not be driven. Would drive a simple "funnel". Who am I, after all. Simple Colonel. And then there's the Chevrolet!



Moreover, the driver in the form of a senior sergeant opens the back door, salutes and says: "Sit down, Comrade Colonel."

I wanted to joke that, they say, don't "sit down", but "sit down", but I didn't, so as not to invite trouble and not breed familiarity.

Let's go to pre-holiday Moscow. Around the garlands of light bulbs, banners: "Long live the 38th anniversary of the Great October Revolution!". Some posters have Arabic numerals, others have Roman numerals. Portraits of Lenin are hung all around, but no one else.

The people had not yet come to their senses after the sudden death of Comrade Stalin, and the government decided not to irritate the layman with new portraits. Moreover, the faces in these portraits, no matter how you draw them, do not turn out to be smart. They look like clowns. Then already many said: "The circus, and only."

So Soviet power did not end in 1991, but then - in the second half of the fifties.

In order for you to better understand this story, I will tell you briefly who broke through to the leadership of the country after the assassination of Comrade Stalin. Or after the coup d'état in February-March 1953.

Khrushchev became the first party secretary. You probably know this. Malenkov was appointed prime minister. Marshal Bulganin from professional party apparatchiks became Minister of Defense. Ignatiev, appointed by Stalin, remained the Minister of State Security, replacing the arrested Abakumov. Also a fruit - I'll tell you! He was secretary of the Saratov city committee, then moved to the apparatus of the Central Committee and from there was thrown to "strengthen the organs."

He led the entire "doctors' case", personally bungled the so-called "Jewish youth case", which in general - even through clenched teeth - they do not like to mention, ordered to torture Abakumov himself, and after the coup he calmly remained in his place and took part in the extermination of the old apparatus of the MGB.

After the execution of Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, Colonel-General Kruglov, Abakumov's former deputy for SMERSH, became Minister of the Interior after the execution of Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria. He was even called "the forefather of Soviet corruption."

Before they had time to drag Comrade Stalin into the mausoleum, the conspirators squabbled among themselves. As a result, Malenkov flew - in the past, the person closest to Stalin, count, from the year thirty-nine. Best friend of Lavrenty Pavlovich. He thought to pay off with the blood of Lavrenty Pavlovich. It didn't work out. Kicked out with a bang and replaced by Bulganin. And Marshal Zhukov, the great commander, was appointed to the vacant post of Minister of Defense.

I remember that Comrade Stalin once said to Abakumov: "With such a great commander, you must have a population of six hundred million." After the war, Stalin wanted to create a special commission of inquiry into such a nightmarish loss of our army. The first calculations showed that about thirty million people were lost.

He called, they say, Zhukov and asked: "How did you fight, that you allowed such losses?" And Zhukov answers him: "As you ordered, so I fought. You yourself said that this war should be the end of the collectivization process. And they brilliantly foresaw that the losses would be the same." "But in collectivization," the leader objected, "we lost only fifteen million people. And there are twice as many! How did this happen? And Marshal Zhukov answered him: "No one helped us in collectivization. We tried ourselves.

Because only fifteen million and it turned out. And here Hitler helped us! This is the indicator we reached!"

From such impudence, Comrade Stalin almost had a heart attack. The leader came to his senses and immediately ordered a search at Zhukov's dacha.

Lukich looked at me carefully. It looks like he was thinking something. Then he waved his hand and blurted out:

— I participated in this search. Mother honest! What did we find there! There are thirty gold watches. Whole heaps of rings, pendants, gold chains, a handful of earrings with diamonds. There were seven hundred and fifty silver forks and spoons, three hundred and thirty silver foxes, three kilometers of manufactory, forty huge carpets, sixty paintings in gilded frames, precious sets for about a thousand items, and even, as I remember now, seven accordions with artistic workmanship. You can't remember everything!

When Comrade Stalin was informed about this, he grinned and said: "That's why he killed so many people so that he wouldn't have to share with anyone." And he sent Zhukov to Sverdlovsk, where he got married out of grief. And the entire headquarters ordered him to be imprisoned for degeneration, since all the staff at the dachas, if they had a little less stolen than their boss, then not much.

I remember that I interrogated one general from Zhukov's entourage. I ask: "Did you also steal six hundred silver spoons, forks and other tableware?"

"Yes, I stole it," he replies.

"For what?" - I am sincerely surprised, - you might think that hundreds of guests visited you. Why did you steal so many cutlery? What about four hundred pairs of women's stockings, eighty pairs of shoes, three hundred pieces of clothing? Are you going to trade with all this booty?" I continued to inquire, sincerely trying to understand their motives. "Of course, I was not going to trade," the general admitted, but he partially stole all this himself with the active participation of his wife.

That's the kind of people it was. Zhukov also distinguished himself in Sverdlovsk when he drove soldiers in some tunics through the epicenter of a nuclear explosion. Out of forty thousand people, five thousand remained alive after five years, and after another five, one thousand. And all of them at the time of the test were on average twenty-five years old.

Do you understand now why Lenin fled to the zone? He escaped from the psychology of these people: let the world collapse, but I must have seven hundred silver spoons! True, Ilyich himself went off scale in the other direction - let no one have anything! Just me! This is the basis of Leninism. The foundations of Stalinism are different - everyone has a jersey, a spoon and a ration. And don't think that it only started after the war. Dzerzhinsky and Dybenko were the first to set the tone for this. The one with the girls did not want to sleep otherwise than on the bed of Prince Yusupov. Lenin himself was more fond of letters of credit to bearer.

When they were still arguing over the formula of socialism "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," Dzerzhinsky explained to his comrades that they understood the concepts of "ability" and "need" in a vulgar way.

"Ability," taught Comrade Dzerzhinsky, "is an individual state task for each worker, the verification of the fulfillment of which is entrusted to the state. For this purpose, it is necessary to create special commissions consisting of three people." "And "need," Comrade Dybenko echoed him, "is a list of products, clothing and other benefits drawn up by the social security agency, which the state guarantees to everyone, provided

realization of abilities". That's it.

- Lukich, - I entered into the veteran's monologue, - it turns out something like two tribunals: while you are at liberty, the party committee, the administration and the trade union committee judge your abilities; if you are under investigation - your fate, and in Dybenko's terminology - your needs, - the judicial troika decides! Brilliant.

"That's the thing, it's genius. Just a different understanding of the meaning of simple words gives such an effect: the leadership has arrogated to itself the right to determine both the abilities and needs of its citizens, and citizens struggle all their lives to underestimate their abilities and exaggerate their needs.

- Yes, it's a whole philosophy on the contrary! I exclaimed. - Lukic, yes, I see you, right at the root of the problem - why we do not want to work normally - grabbed.

I didn't discover anything new here. It's the philosophy of nature, if you want to know. Everyone wants to live according to these laws, but not everyone succeeds.

The leaders of our country were given a great opportunity to experiment on a territory inhabited by two hundred million experimental units. But management, now everyone understands, was not up to par. There were too many individual shortcomings of individual leaders. In general, everyone had their shortcomings. And they didn't consider the people to be people, they didn't even consider them just mammals. Something like controlled cockroaches, which can be crushed for any reason and just like that. Sometimes in spite of some opponent from the Central Committee of the party. They didn't do as I asked – here you are, twenty thousand died of starvation, drowned in a swamp, blew up on mines, burned down at some landfills.

And when necessary, not twenty thousand, but twenty million. If, of course, Stalin's plan to take over the whole world had succeeded, then there would have been at least some sense in this. But after the collapse of the plan, all these things only drove the country into the most dense Middle Ages with two nuclear bombs bought from the Americans.

Why am I telling you all this? So that everything that follows becomes clearer to you.

There is another hero in this story. This is the commander-in-chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Kuznetsov Nikolai Gerasimovich. But I will talk about it later.

So, I'm going in a Chevrolet, I'm watching where they're taking me. At first I thought - to the Lubyanka, to the inner prison. I look - no, in the other direction.

I didn't have time to gasp, we had already passed through the Spassky Gates. Security did not even stop, but, on the contrary, they took everyone under the hood. It is clear that it was not me who was greeted, but the noble car in which I was seated.

We roll up to the government house. The driver opens the door and says:

"Please, Comrade Colonel. Into this hallway. They're waiting for you there."

I opened a massive door with the inscription "From myself" on a copper plate and found myself in a spacious hall with a standard red carpet No. 7 running along the marble floor to the marble steps of a two-flight staircase.

A guy in a double-breasted suit and tie is pacing nervously up and down the hall.

- Why are you late? he squealed nervously at the sight of me, "you were warned that... you were ordered... you want...

I didn't even have time to answer him that no one warned me of anything and didn't order me anything, when he grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me, but not up the stairs, but through some door on the side and pushed me into a huge elevator cabin.

"You'll have to take the elevator," he said reproachfully, breathing heavily, "but you and I are not supposed to ... If they notice, then ..."

His ability to not finish sentences was simply remarkable. The elevator stopped, having risen two floors, and we again found ourselves in a long corridor, where a lieutenant colonel of the MGB sat at a table with a telephone with a sword belt and a pistol.

"With me, with me," the escort quickly shouted and almost ran down the corridor, pulling me along with him.

We stopped at a large bog oak double door. At that moment, the clock hanging on the wall trembled with a minute hand, showing exactly six o'clock in the evening. The guy accompanying me with a sigh of relief wiped the sweat from his forehead, smoothed his hair, pulled down his jacket and croaked:

- We succeeded, and then ...

"Who are you, poor thing?" I asked.

"Chief assistant," he said, not without pride, and added: "Wait here.

The referent felt the wall, looked at me with a thieving look and pressed some almost invisible button next to the door. One leaf of the doors opened, or rather, slightly opened, and swallowed up the senior referent.

I didn't even have time to look around properly in the corridor, when the poor fellow appeared again and almost sang:

- Follow me.

"Wait here" and "follow me" were the only phrases he got through.

We passed through a small reception room, which, as I later learned, was officially called the "room of assistants on duty". One of the referents sat, as they say, on the door. He was wearing headphones, through which he listened to the doorbell and, if necessary, opened it. The second referent frankly messed around, solving a crossword puzzle in the Ogonyok magazine. As for the senior assistant, apparently the shift supervisor, he led me through this room, led me to other, much less representative doors, and, stepping aside, said:

- Come on in.

- And you? I asked, stopping in front of the door.

"I'm not supposed to," he admitted honestly. 2

The first thing that caught my eye when I entered the brightly lit room was a monstrous television set in the far corner. I have never seen such huge television sets today, and I still don't know where he could come from then, in 1955. There was a table next to the TV, on which a whole herd of telephones crowded.

Glancing around, I saw several huge leather armchairs and the same sofa. The chairs were so large that I did not immediately see who was sitting in them, or rather, drowning.

However, looking closer, I recognized both. In one chair, which was to my right, sat the Minister of State Security Semyon Ignatiev, and in the one to the left, the new Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Nikolai Bulganin. When he became prime minister, he took off his marshal's uniform and changed into civilian clothes. That's why I didn't recognize him right away. Even in military uniform, he looked like a sort of kind grandfather-academician, and even in civilian clothes - and there is nothing to say! Superintellectual! It was even hard to imagine that it was he who beat academician Voznesensky in the cell with his boots in the face, who did not want to confess to the attempted murder of Comrade Stalin with the help of his treacherous economic concepts.

I stopped in some confusion, because I did not know what, how and to whom I should report. Therefore, turning into the space between the chairs, I announced in the voice of a well-trained butler:

— Arrived at your command.

Then Ignatiev got up from his chair, walked towards me, shook my hand and said:

— Hello, Vasily Lukich. I have heard a lot about you and I am very sorry that I did not get to know you personally earlier. Come in, sit down in this chair opposite us.

Bulganin also held out his hand to me. And even got up a little:

"It is very pleasant," he says, "to meet a man who worked with Ilyich himself.

I sat down in a chair. I look forward to what will happen next. Both are silent, but they look at me with interest. Then my old acquaintance, the senior assistant, appears in the room and puts a glass of warm milk in front of Bulganin. And just as imperceptibly disappears.

"Vasily Lukich," Ignatiev breaks the silence, "in our difficult times, there are very few people left whom the leaders of the party and government could fully trust, without equally jeopardizing the interests of the party and their own security.

You were recommended as a person who knows how to keep state secrets. Frankly speaking, the very fact that you worked with Vladimir Ilyich Lenin for quite a long time is enough for me.

I was silent, wondering who could recommend me to them at such a time.

"A great misfortune has happened," Ignatiev continued, looking warily for some reason not at me, but at Bulganin. He slightly nodded his beard. I used to think that one of the new members of the Politburo suddenly died today and readily put on a mournful expression on my face.

"In Sevastopol," Ignatiev announced, lowering his voice, "the Novorossiysk exploded and sank." There are human casualties.

At first, I didn't even understand what it was about.

- Exploded and sank Novorossiysk? In the Sevastopol? Earthquake? Why in Sevastopol? After all, Novorossiysk is in the Caucasus.

I looked at Bulganin, but he only nodded his beard in agreement, then turned to Ignatiev.

"The battleship Novorossiysk exploded in the bay of Sevastopol," the minister repeated.

- Linkor? — I asked, — in Sevastopol?

- Yes, - Bulganin confirmed in a soft voice, smiling sadly, - a battleship in Sevastopol with human casualties.

— Diversion? I guessed.

"Very likely," the Minister of Security nodded his head, "a daring sabotage of the first category. With human sacrifice.

I must say, I understood very little what a battleship is and how it differs from, say, a cruiser. I have never been involved in the fleet in my life, and all my knowledge was limited to the sight of river trams scurrying along the Moscow River. Therefore, I cautiously asked how I could be useful, or, to put it more simply, how could I justify the trust placed in me?

"We want," Bulganin said in the same soft voice, "that it is you who investigated all the circumstances of this tragedy.

"Alone," I asked in bewilderment, "or as part of some kind of commission?" It needs a commission. I don't think I'm even alone.

"The State Commission is already being formed," Bulganin explained. - A commission from the Navy is also being created. They will do their job within certain limits, confining themselves to purely technical issues. From you, we expect an independent independent investigation. We need to know who did it.

"But here we need a whole brigade from the state security, which should work in cooperation with the Special Department of the Fleet," I objected to the prime minister, turned to the minister of state security and looked at him inquiringly.

Ignatiev gestured for me to continue the conversation with Bulganin.

I turned back to the prime minister and continued, but in a different direction:

- I want to inform you, Comrade Chairman of the Council of Ministers, that I actually no longer serve in the state security agencies, since I was withdrawn to the reserve and work as a lecturer in the Knowledge society.

"We understand you," Ignatiev interrupted me, "but you, too, understand that belonging to the organs and trust in the party and government do not necessarily accompany each other. Of course, the authorities will also take part in the investigation. A brigade from the MGB has already been created ... - The minister sighed heavily and continued: - But I'm afraid that she will be able to learn little. This explosion, quite clearly, will cost me my position. In fact, I am no longer the Minister of State Security. I am being replaced by General Serov.

- Head of the GRU? I asked, somewhat surprised at the choice of a candidate for such a specific position.

"Imagine," Bulganin spread his plump palms, "all the country's special services fall under a single command, as under Yezhov. He grimaced as if the choice of a candidate for the position of chief guard of state security depended not on him, in particular.

"Yes," I thought, "now it's the end of Abakumov, Serov will settle old scores with him." But out loud said:

"I have never dealt with military matters. Moreover, naval ones. Besides, if the state, naval and state security commissions have already been set up, which of these commissions should I join?

"Nothing," answered Bulganin, "an Extraordinary Commission of the Presidium of the Central Committee will supposedly be formed especially for you, and you will supposedly be its extraordinary and plenipotentiary representative with gigantic rights.

From the words "Extraordinary Commission" a warm wind of romantic revolutionary youth blew over me with exciting impulses saturated with powder gases. Chekists had enormous rights up to execution on the spot. I wanted to ask if I would have such rights, but Ignatiev, apparently having read my thoughts, said:

- You will have the most extensive powers. All Party, Soviet and administrative bodies will be obliged to assist you. If you need to interrogate someone, you can count on the full assistance of the local body of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the prosecutor's office, you will be issued a special certificate.

"Good deeds," I thought, "gigantic powers," and in order to interrogate someone, you have to turn to the police for assistance or, pardon the expression, to the prosecutor's office. And asked aloud:

- And can I also count on the assistance of local security agencies and naval counterintelligence?

Ignatiev sighed, and Bulganin averted his eyes. My question was a matter of principle, so I was silent and calmly waited for a response.

- In principle, yes, - the Minister of State Security hesitated, - but we would like you to conduct your work independently of counterintelligence, since the comrades there already have a version and it can have a strong influence on you.

- And what is this version? I dared to ask, although I should not have done it at all. One way or another, I would have known their version.

"Comrades believe," Ignatiev cleared his throat, "that the Italians did it.

Lukich suddenly laughed and fell silent. I, too, was silent, not understanding what caused the veteran's laughter.

"Lukic," I interrupted the long pause, "what did you say that was funny?

- It's hard for you to understand now, but if you knew what the word "Italians" meant in the language of Ignatiev in the late forties, you might also laugh.

The fact is that at one time, just in the process of the "doctors' case", which was led by Ignatiev, Jews were called "Italians" and "French" in the working slang of the Chekists. For example, a curator from the MGB calls at some enterprise and instructs a personnel officer: "Ivan Ivanovich, so that you don't have a single Italian by the first number. You understood me?". And the personnel officer cheerfully reports: "You shouldn't worry, everything has been all right with the Jews for a long time." So I thought that they again want to hang the sunken battleship on the Jews and their intrigues. And so he asked:

What other Italians? Are we going to the second round?

— How so what Italians? - Ignatiev asked in bewilderment, - well, the Italians who live in Italy ... Italy - there is such a country. Do you know?

"I know," I answer, "it has the shape of a boot." So are you talking about them?

- Well, of course, - Ignatiev grins, - and who did you think, Vasily Lukich? No, no, now we are talking about real Italians who were Hitler's allies during the war years. Did you understand?

"No," I say honestly, "I misunderstood something, Comrade Minister, what do the Italians have to do with it?"

- The ship is Italian, - the minister answers, - so they decided it and that one - you understand?

"No," I confess, "I'm sorry, I don't understand anything... Whose ship is it?" Ours or Italian?

- It was once Italian, - Bulganin gently explains, - and after the war it became ours. as a trophy. The Italians were offended and decided it ... You understand!

- And how did they get to Sevastopol? I ask, through the CIA?

- This is exactly what you need to find out, - Bulganin smiles modestly, - we want you to find out. How did they get to Sevastopol? Who let them in? Do you understand, dear Vasily Lukich?

True, again I did not understand anything, but I plucked up courage and said:

- Comrade Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Comrade Minister, I understand how much confidence is placed in me, but I want to withdraw, as they say, self-rejection due to complete incompetence in these matters. I worked half of my service in the Gulag and did not touch military issues.

"But you brilliantly investigated the sabotage at the MZM," recalls Ignatiev, "and, as far as I remember, you were even presented with the Order of the Red Star for this.

Indeed, in 1946 I studied history with the MZM. MZM is an abbreviation of the words "We are for Peace". That was the name of the huge cannon, which the "convicts" assembled in the Siberian taiga for fear of all the enemies of the USSR. The caliber of this gun was three and a half meters, and the length of the barrel was seven kilometers. This gun was created by one artillery "sharaga" from 1935. In theory, it turned out that this mortar should reach anywhere in the world. At first, it was supposed to be aimed at Berlin, then at Helsinki, Tokyo, and after the war it was already firmly decided to point at Washington. The shell weighed one hundred tons. The rate of fire was determined to be approximately one shot per hour.

The well-known designer Korolev objected to the creation of such a "fool", assuring that the age of rockets is coming, and creating such artillery monsters is an empty veil of money. He was imprisoned as a saboteur and the work continued. First, German intelligence got wind of this gigantic construction site, and then British and American. But thanks to the measures taken to misinform the enemy, they decided that an oil pipeline was being led through this area, and calmed down.

In the summer of 1946, the MZM cannon is the official marking - the Mortar of Outrageous Power, and "We are for the World" - the oral work, for which the term was supposed, was ready for testing. The mortar was deployed in the direction of the Arctic Ocean so that the projectile hit directly on the North Pole.

A lot of different commissions came from Moscow, and the whole thing was under the control of Comrade Stalin himself. They put a shell into the cannon, and then - giant caps with gunpowder. The gunpowder was set on fire with the help of an electric discharge. And then the unexpected happened. The projectile passed



five kilometers along the trunk, and stopped at the sixth kilometer. And neither good, nor here. What to do?

It's scary to open the lock - what if it explodes if the gunpowder hasn't completely burned out? They waited and waited - there was nothing to do, they decided to send the "convicts" to open the castle, promising them to mow down a third of the term. The chairman of the selection committee died of a heart attack right on the spot.

While they were thinking and guessing, the projectile exploded right in the barrel. Three kilometers away the trunk fell off and sank into the swamp. I saw it on film.

The investigation showed that most of the powder caps contained not gunpowder, but cement, while some contained pasta. Gunpowder turned out to be only in a fifth of the caps, in the rest - cement or pasta.

Comrade Stalin was then terribly angry. The artillery "sharaga" was transferred to a rationed bread ration, and a hot meal for dinner was taken away from senior scientists. But who replaced the gunpowder with cement and pasta, they never really found out, although five hundred people were imprisoned. Stalin personally trampled with his boots Dmitry Ustinov, who was responsible for this project from the military-industrial complex of the Central Committee. But then he forgave me. Comrade Stalin was generally very quick-witted.

The remains of this mortar were lying around at that training ground for a long time, and then slowly, after the assassination of Stalin, both halves of the huge barrel were driven into Iraq, because they also wanted to make such a mortar in order to first shoot at Tel Aviv, and then at Washington.

I took part in the investigation, finding out which factory made pasta that was stuffed into charging caps. The directors of the factory, I remember, were removed from their posts and given a reprimand along the party line without entering. For which, however, I don't remember.

Bulganin's words that I "brilliantly investigated" the case of the mortar "We are for Peace" sounded somewhat strange to me, which he apparently sensed from the expression on my face. Therefore, he explained:

— It was you, after all, who discovered that the barrel of the gun was sawn off by the enemies during installation?

I never found anything like this, but did not refuse and asked:

- Do you think that in the case of the battleship, someone filed something there?

Bulganin smiled enigmatically again and answered:

"They are all sawing the branch they are sitting on, but they don't understand it.

— Do you mean the Italians, Comrade Marshal of the Soviet Union? I asked cautiously.

"Including the Italians," Bulganin nodded his head.

"Be careful with the Italians, Vasily Lukich," Ignatiev intervened, "you seem to know nothing, otherwise there will be talk, there may be a diplomatic scandal or a new accusation of anti-Semitism. Now with all this strictly. Nikita Sergeevich gathered everyone and personally instructed.

At the mention of Khrushchev's name, Bulganin grimaced, as if from a toothache, and said:

Comrades, let's not get distracted. And he looked at me, as if ending the conversation:

— Vasily Lukich, do you understand your task?

— In general terms, — I confessed, — and to whom should I report on the results and conclusions?

“Don’t report anything to anyone,” both statesmen answered in unison, Vasily Lukich.

“Interesting,” I drawled, “this has never happened before in my practice. Why should I conduct this investigation if I do not report anything to anyone? Sorry comrades, no Understand.

“First of all,” Ignatiev explained patiently, “I have been holding my position for the last few days, and possibly hours. It is possible that I have already been removed from my post, and our conversation is almost private. As for the highly respected Nikolai Alexandrovich,” he nodded towards Bulganin, “he is in approximately the same position. Therefore, no matter how your investigation ends, you will not be able to report anything to us. As a private individual, I absolutely do not want to hear such things. I think Comrade Bulganin does too. Therefore, if you really want to report all this to someone, then you will have to report to General Serov.

Or the marshal. Zhukov,” Bulganin added with a sad smile.

- Or no one, - summed up Ignatiev, - completely at your discretion.

- In this case, you will work not for the leadership, - Bulganin affectionately explained, - but for history. Do you understand, Vasily Lukich? And history, Vasily Lukich, cannot be deceived. She herself will tell you who, how and when to report on the results. Maybe even after your death.

At this point, I was frightened that I was again being dragged into some kind of mystical puzzle, where I would have to prove something to someone after my own death. And I decided to move the conversation into a more practical direction.

“In any case,” I said, “before I get down to business, I need to get to know the problem a little, read some documents. Can you provide them to me?”

- This, please, - Ignatiev nodded his head, - we will give you the necessary documents and even a consultant who will quickly bring you up to date.

Why didn't I refuse? I would look at someone who would refuse, accepting the task from the head of government and the minister of state security. You don't understand now what power these people had. I could have been shot right in that big leather chair. Or they could have been in the room of referents or in the corridor. They didn't care.

When the assistant was leading me back, the lieutenant colonel on duty, sitting at the table, at the sight of my escort, threw:

- You see a friend, you will write an explanatory letter to me.

“Understood,” the senior assistant blushed crimson.

- Why an explanation? I asked as we walked down the hall.

“For using the elevator,” the senior assistant explained, “we are not supposed to use the elevator, but if we were late, I could have gotten into even worse trouble.” And so I have a tacit permission to use the elevator in extreme cases.

- Have fun! I said goodbye. In our Lubyanka, even the majors used elevators. 3

In our circles, at one time such an anecdote was popular.

At a trial where an inveterate murderer is tried, the defender, for lack of other arguments, asks the court to take into account that his client is an orphan. At the same time, the defender does not mention that the defendant became an orphan because he killed his own parents. What exactly is he being judged for?

I found myself roughly in the position of this very lawyer, since from the first words it became clear to me that I had been invited to investigate for only one purpose: Bulganin and Ignatiev hoped that the results I had obtained would help them maintain or regain their high positions, which they held in the party -state nomenclature.

For about a week I kept up to date with the help of documents and a consultant seconded from some Kremlin structure, and maybe from the GRU. However, I was not very interested in this, and it was forbidden to ask the consultant any questions. I didn't even know his name. He introduced himself indistinctly, and I did not ask again. It seems to me that he was sure that they were going to throw me behind the lines of one of our many opponents.

The referent was very surprised that we were not separated by a screen, since he has no right to see my face.

I promised him next time to come in a veil, but I categorically refused the screen.

Despite some oddities that are inevitable for people who have served for a long time in the system of one or another special service, my consultant knew his business well. He lectured me for a whole week. I didn't ask questions. Asking questions is sometimes harder than answering them. To ask questions, you need to know the topic very well. And I didn't know her at all. Because only listened and memorized. It was forbidden to write down anything, but I have a good memory, which was noted in all my service characteristics and attestations. Lectures lasted four hours daily.

I learned the following from them.

It turns out that our fleet, like everything else in our country, was bending and convulsing along with the general line of the party. After the end of the civil war, we practically had no fleet left. All naval specialists, that is, officers, were declared alien and hostile elements, very far from the needs and aspirations of the world proletariat. Ilyich, with his characteristic genius, firmly believed that the world's first state of workers and peasants did not need a fleet at all and proposed replacing it with naval units of the Cheka-GPU. Therefore, the fleet began to be cut, and the former tsarist naval officers were imprisoned and shot. However, they began to shoot them back in 1917, and in 1918 they filled three barges with former admirals and captains and drowned them in the Gulf of Finland. On the Black Sea, they acted even more coolly - they burned officers in ship fireboxes. Those officers who decided to stay in their homeland and did not flee abroad were destroyed as a class, along with the bourgeoisie and the nobility, around the beginning of the thirties.

When Lenin became disillusioned with his ideals and went with me to the zone to rewrite all fifty volumes of his immortal works, many of the plans of the leader of the world proletariat were either forgotten or distorted.

It was precisely all the precepts of Ilyich connected with the future of our fleet that were subjected to the greatest perversion, since after the Kronstadt rebellion the leader of the world proletariat did not

saw no future for the fleet, except for turning it into scrap metal. At the same time, it was supposed to destroy all the officers, and disperse the sailors to concentration camps. And if Lenin conceived something, he did it without fail. True, as in all other areas, he failed to bring the matter to complete destruction. "To the ground, and then..." What remained were some rusty ships and a bunch of frightened former officers who daily expect arrest or execution.

However, Comrade Stalin thought on this matter quite differently from Comrade Lenin. Moreover, he was firmly convinced that it was also impossible for our country to live without a fleet, as well as without the "Short Course of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks". Therefore, the great leader decided not only to revive the fleet, but also to make it the most powerful fleet in the world so that it would be able to fight at once with the fleets of England, Germany, France, Japan and the United States of America, destroying them in turn and all together.

More than anything in the world, Comrade Stalin loved battleships, which, in his opinion, better than any argument, raise the prestige of the country of the victorious proletariat. And although there was no money in the treasury, Comrade Stalin ordered the construction of huge battleships in the amount of more than thirty pieces, modestly pointing out: "We will collect a penny, but we will build it."

Unfortunately, the enemies of the people tried to thwart this initiative of Comrade Stalin, like all others. By this time, a fresh growth of naval officers had grown up, having graduated from colleges already under Soviet rule, which made the existence of the remnants of tsarist naval specialists an absolute absurdity. What Comrade Stalin remarked with mild reproach to Genrikh Yagoda. New admirals also appeared, mainly from the unfinished old-time midshipmen and upstart sailors.

They were not very literate, but they knew how to fool Comrade Stalin like no one else. The fact is that among them were supporters of two directions: the ocean fleet - to gain dominance in the world's oceans and the coastal fleet - to defend their own coasts.

They fooled the head of the leader of all nations so much that he made the only, from my point of view, correct decision - to shoot both of them, and finally appointed a person from our department, that is, from the NKVD, as People's Commissar of the Navy. They became Yezhov's deputy - Frinovsky - a professional Chekist since the time of Comrade Dzerzhinsky. Frinovsky understood his appointment correctly and began with equal energy to imprison and shoot new and old naval officers as an element completely unnecessary and dangerous for the construction of socialism.

In the midst of his activities, Yezhov unexpectedly hanged himself, and the next day Frinovsky himself was shot. So the fleet was orphaned again.

But what was good in the then fleet was the constantly opening new vacancies. Every day someone was shot or imprisoned, and therefore, despite the known risk, the prospects for growth were very bright.

Thanks to Frinovsky's tireless activity, yesterday's lieutenants became admirals and waited with bated breath for their turn to be shot or sent to a camp.

And then, at the suggestion of Comrade Zhdanov, Comrade Stalin appointed Admiral Kuznetsov as the new People's Commissar of the Navy.

The atmosphere of the famous "Russian roulette" reigned in the fleet. No one knew where he would wake up tomorrow - in the death row, in the barracks of some zone or in the admiralty salon, or even in the office of the people's commissariat.

Kuznetsov himself was a simple Pomeranian guy, from the peasants. Dreaming of becoming a military sailor, he never even in his thoughts saw himself higher than the commander of the ship. This position was the pinnacle of his dreams. But thanks to "Stalin's roulette" he became a people's commissar.

It seems to me that never has a roulette ball landed so precisely in the right place. Ilyich once said correctly: "All our plans are shit, the main thing is the selection of personnel." And Comrade Stalin repeatedly pointed out that "cadres decide everything."

In this regard, Admiral Kuznetsov was a real find. First of all, he impressed all the members of the Presidium of the Central Committee with his courage when he began to publicly explain to Comrade Stalin how, in fact, the fleet differs from the infantry. They say that Comrade Kalinin even wet his pants with fear, and Comrade Beria was constantly waiting for a signal from Comrade Stalin: immediately take a new people's commissar or wait.

But Stalin listened patiently, sucking on his pipe. It happened in 1939, when the great leader was about to celebrate his sixtieth birthday, and the international situation was developing in such a way that it made it possible to quickly and without much hassle to carry out the plan he had conceived to seize Europe. That is why Comrade Stalin was complacent and benevolent.

Meanwhile, Admiral Kuznetsov explained to the leader that in the infantry every non-commissioned officer or sergeant-major who unexpectedly became a commander or commander and even people's commissar of defense has a chance to prove himself a nugget-commander if he has a loud voice or a split chin. The admiral, of course, did not name any names, but it was already clear to everyone who they were talking about. Comrade Stalin even smiled, and everyone around giggled sycophantly.

In the Navy, Kuznetsov continued to explain, such things do not work. The loss of any navigator, artilleryman, or mechanic cannot be compensated by promotion of boatswains, foremen, and sailors to officers, because the training of a naval specialist takes three to six years. Therefore, if in the army an imprisoned general can be replaced without much damage by his batman, then in the navy even a senior assistant cannot replace a missing commander. Not to mention others.

"Therefore," the new People's Commissar summed up, "before accepting such a high position, he asks Comrade Stalin to release all the naval officers who are there from the camps and continue to refrain from their mass extermination. Otherwise, he, Kuznetsov, will not be able to justify such a high trust and will not accept the post of People's Commissar, even if he himself is immediately shot.

"Just don't scare us, Comrade Kuznetsov," said Comrade Stalin then, "when you deserve it, then we will shoot you. Maybe even earlier. In the meantime, go and work."

But what the admiral said penetrated Comrade Stalin, and he ordered that the sailors, regardless of the article, be released from the camps and sent back to the fleet. And henceforth, Comrade Stalin ordered the sailors not to be imprisoned, no matter what accusations were made against them.

"A sailor," the leader pointed out, "cannot be an enemy of the people."

I remember this circular myself. After that, no matter what denunciations about the sailors were written, the authorities did not react. Or, say, they caught a terrorist, and thanks to the skill of an investigator, he quickly named the names of the members of his terrorist organization, consisting of, say, eight hundred people. Everyone was taken according to the list, but if among them were officers of the fleet, they were immediately released with an apology, and further testimony against them was not even entered into the protocol. This is what our comrade Stalin was like! The consultant told me even more

interesting case. Before the war, a certain captain of the 1st rank, Gorshkov, negligently landed on the reefs the newest destroyer called "Resolute", built on people's pennies.

Comrade Stalin, when he found out about this, was terribly upset and, like anyone else in his place, ordered this same Gorshkov to be shot as an enemy of the people, a pest and saboteur recruited by Japanese intelligence.

Then Admiral Kuznetsov made his way to him and began: "Comrade Stalin, you promised me!"

"What did I search you for? Comrade Stalin asks. "Why are you yelling like that?"

"That's the ship's commander! shouts Kuznetsov. "Do you know, Comrade Stalin, how many years it takes to train a ship commander?"

"And if he destroys my ship every day," Comrade Stalin asks, "then what?"

"He will no longer destroy ships! the admiral promises. "I won't let him take command of the ship again."

Comrade Stalin was quick-witted.

"Okay," he says, "we won't shoot him. Punish yourself!"

Kuznetsov was delighted and eventually made Gorshkov his deputy, and so that it would no longer be habitual for him to destroy destroyers, he promoted him to rear admiral. Comrade Stalin laughed, but approved and said to Lavrenty Pavlovich:

"They say in the West that we don't have democracy. And let them find such a case. A man put a ship on stones, and we made him an admiral for this! This is the essence of democratic centralism!"

This is where the war began. The battleships that Comrade Stalin so dreamed of remained unfinished. One fell into the hands of the Germans during the capture of the city of Nikolaev, and the other two had to be dismantled due to an acute shortage of steel. As for the battleships that we inherited from damned tsarism, one of them stood at the mouth of the Neva throughout the war, and the second in Poti under three layers of camouflage nets.

Comrade Stalin needed battleships to crush the British Empire, but during the war this task was never set, and it was gradually forgotten. Moreover, the British Empire itself fell apart without the help of any battleships.

Moreover, no sooner had the first combat shots been fired in this war than it became clear to everyone that battleships, as the main means of waging naval warfare, were outdated, becoming easy prey for aviation. Realizing this, all the major maritime powers, and primarily the United States and England, waiting for the end of the war, quickly scrapped almost all the remaining battleships in service.

But Comrade Stalin was not like that. He remained true to his first love and after the war he ordered the construction of new ships of this type to be feared by all the enemies of the USSR.

And during the war, he tried to get a couple of battleships from our valiant allies, as they say, for the soul. Since it was difficult to come up with a practical application for them. Moreover, our allies had so many battleships that, without any damage to themselves, they could give Comrade Stalin not a couple, but a whole squadron.

But as people say: "Keep your pocket wider!"

No matter how much Comrade Stalin begged Roosevelt and Churchill, they did not want to listen to anything. The Americans quietly seized absolute dominance in the oceans and did not want to do anything that could lead Comrade Stalin into the temptation to frustrate their global plans.

But Comrade Stalin was an unsurpassed diplomat. Deftly playing on the Anglo-American contradictions, he eventually begged Churchill to lend the Soviet Union some kind of battleship. Moreover, by this time Italy capitulated, and the Soviet Union was entitled to a share of its fleet. So Stalin asked the British for some kind of stale battleship before receiving the "Italian share".

Churchill surrendered and loaned Stalin one battleship, which the British themselves were about to scrap. It was built during the First World War and has not undergone any major repairs since then. Before the war, hands did not reach him, and during the war it was already stupid to spend money, labor and materials on him. They called this battleship "Arkhangelsk" and brought it to Murmansk, where it stood until 1949, not only without any use, but even without movement. And in the forty-ninth year, the British cheapskates demanded him back, threatening to deprive Stalin of his "Italian share" otherwise.

The battleship was given to them - let them choke. But as far as the "Italian share" is concerned, here the allies, to put it mildly, cheated us.

The Italians had the latest battleships, old and very old. Stalin, of course, expected to be given one of the newest. And in vain! After tedious and long negotiations, Stalin was offered the oldest of the Italian battleships "Giulio Cesare", or in our opinion - "Julius Caesar". It was built before the First World War. True, somewhere in the mid-thirties it was overhauled and modernized. But, as the consultant rightly pointed out, modernizing old ships is like giving plastic surgery to aging movie stars. They look good, but everyone knows that they are already over sixty and laugh.

After the Italians commissioned their newest battleships, the Giulio Cesare was assigned to be scrapped, but during the war there was no time for this, and the battleship quietly rusted itself in some ship cemetery.

From there, our former valiant allies pulled it out, tinted something somewhere, welded it somewhere and - here you are, please! Take it if you love battleships so much. In addition, they gave one old cruiser with a completely unpronounceable name and several destroyers.

They dragged this battleship to Sevastopol. Experts examined him and gasped. The ship is all rotten. No watertight bulkhead holds water. Cars are in disrepair. No one knows different systems there, since all the plans and drawings remained in Italy. And to top it all off, it turned out that the caliber of his guns is the kind that we never had in our country. And this means that there are no shells for him and are not expected.

Allies in the Old Italian warehouses scraped together incomplete ammunition. On all the shells there is a stamp - 1913, on caps with gunpowder - the same. There were caps and 1909. All the terms of storage of ammunition are overdue by ten to fifteen times. In other words, it can explode every next second, and at the same time no one should be surprised.

The conclusion of the Marine Technical Committee was unequivocal - the ship was not suitable for operation. Moreover, its exploitation is dangerous in all respects.

Then the most important question arose: who would dare to report to Comrade Stalin about this? It's the same as building people somewhere and giving the command: "Who wants to be shot

- step forward!". Of course, there were no hunters. Therefore, the battleship "Giulio Cesare", renamed in our country "Novorossiysk", continued to be included in the fleet and even went out to sea for some exercises there, however, only in calm weather.

And they all sat quietly. Moreover, Comrade Stalin at that time did not like the fleet at all. After he ordered two battlecruisers to be laid down (the consultant explained that these were the same battleships with some nuances in terms of speed and armor), the admirals began to shrug their shoulders in bewilderment. No, they, of course, did not dare to say anything, but their facial expressions, gestures and the position of the pupils clearly made it clear that the great leader was crazy. Since everyone in the world cut battleships, and Comrade Stalin built them. There was a reverence for the West and the imposition of their morality on us, which Comrade Stalin did not like very much. And he ordered all these admirals to be imprisoned for treason.

Kuznetsov again flew to him to remind him of the promises wrested from the leader in 1939.

Comrade Stalin became so indignant that he did not even listen to him. Moreover, Admiral Kuznetsov himself, with his claims, fell under the hot hand of the leader of all peoples. True, Comrade Stalin did not imprison his favorite, but demoted him from admiral of the fleet to rear admiral (it's the same as from marshals to major generals, like Kulik) and pushed him to secondary roles.

But, as I have already noted more than once, Comrade Stalin was very resourceful. True, he did not release the admirals from prison, but he forgave Kuznetsov. I returned him to his former position, restored his title and set him the task of wresting dominance in the oceans from American imperialism. And it really hurts in this world ocean, the Americans become to behave impudently. This looked especially gloomy during the Korean War, when their battleships approached thirty miles to our border and, with their fire, mixed all the ambitious plans of Kim Il Sung with the ground.

The consultant did not know that Kim Il Sung himself was imprisoned in Lubyanka in those years. Well, I, of course, did not enlighten him.

So, Comrade Stalin set a task for Admiral Kuznetsov, which means that it must be carried out. To some, this task may have seemed insurmountable, but the most difficult tasks have always been solved under the leadership of Comrade Stalin.

Admiral Kuznetsov knew this better than anyone else and ardently set to work.

A powerful military shipbuilding program was launched, which was controlled by the leader himself.

Everything was going well - the ships in our factories grew like mushrooms after the rain. New ships were very much needed, since those that had been built before the war either perished or rusted in different bays, because Comrade Stalin forbade them - out of harm's way - to go to sea.

But here, as the scoundrel Hakim had croaked, the soul of Comrade Stalin forever left the body of the great leader, using his favorite method, and a great era of change began in the country, which always happens after coup d'état.

Marshal Zhukov again entered the force, providing the military part of the coup and crushing our glorious organs with the blunt armor of his tanks. But state security was not the only state institution about which Zhukov and Khrushchev had their own views. The fleet also fell into the field of their destructive energy.



Marshal Zhukov himself could not stand the fleet at all, and Admiral Kuznetsov in particular. There were any number of reasons. Firstly, the marshal considered Kuznetsov an upstart, and the fleet itself an expensive and completely useless toy of Stalin. He even once remarked (even before the search at his dacha) that if we had no fleet at all, the war would have ended a year earlier. The marshal loved the ground forces and believed that all battles could be won with the help of a soldier with a three-ruler. And if a water barrier appears on the way of this soldier, then he will overcome it either by swimming, or on a log, or on a gate stolen in a neighboring village. And so it will get, if necessary, then to America. He will get out on the shore, shake himself off and go to the bayonet with a shout of "Hurrah!".

The marshal hated Admiral Kuznetsov with a fierce hatred. Firstly, because he went to Comrade Stalin's favorites. Favorites always hate each other. Secondly, because the admiral was ready to do anything to save some of his arrested lieutenants and almost always succeeded in this. And Zhukov kept quiet even when his entire headquarters, including the driver, was transferred to him.

There were cases when Stalin himself ordered Kuznetsov to shoot one of his subordinates. For business. And then the admiral somehow did not fulfill the Stalinist order, limiting himself to a milder punishment. And Zhukov - order to shoot one - he will gladly shoot ten.

I remember that during the "doctors' case" we received such information regarding Admiral Kuznetsov. In Leningrad, at the Naval Academy, a certain Jewish woman with the rank of major worked as a teacher of a foreign language. Before the war, she was with Admiral Kuznetsov in Spain as an interpreter. It was rumored that she even had a short but vivid romance with the admiral there. The academic authorities, fighting cosmopolitanism, deprived the woman of both her job and her title. In desperation, she turned to the admiral for help, although after returning from Spain they, of course, never saw each other again. The admiral himself had just been returned after a deep disgrace and, it seemed, should not have risked his position. But, nevertheless, having received a letter from this woman, he immediately ordered to take her to work in one of the naval schools in Leningrad.

I don't know if Comrade Stalin was informed about this trick of the admiral, but there was no reaction.

But most of all, Zhukov hated Kuznetsov because he once, even before the war, knocked out Comrade Stalin so that all the marshals and generals of the army passed the swimming test. The admiral is motivated by the fact that, since the land commanders constantly repeat that the fleet must obey the army and come up with various transport tasks for the fleet with the deployment of front-line headquarters on board battleships and cruisers, they are obliged to pass the swimming test, since any surprises can happen at sea. Comrade Stalin considered these arguments reasonable. That was laughter!

Not a single marshal or general of the army, of course, knew how to swim. But no one dared to disobey the order of Comrade Stalin. To pass the test, everyone was taken to one secret pool. Comrade Stalin himself arrived, along with Malenkov and Zhdanov. Marshals and generals were left in the water, where the depth was up to the top.

This scene should have been seen. Comrade Stalin laughed to tears. Zhdanov even became ill from laughter, he had to give an injection. Laughing enough, Comrade Stalin ordered Admiral Kuznetsov to train the entire senior command staff of the Red Army in swimming within three months. Of course, they all harbored a fierce grudge against Kuznetsov.

Due to the dislike of the high ground command for everything naval, very strange things happened to our fleet during the war.

Marine brigades were exterminated in the land theater of operations with special pleasure. Aviation almost never provided air cover to ships during the entire war, while the fleet was required to write off almost the entire crew to the infantry.

As expected, they did not manage, as they say, to close the sovereign eyes of Comrade Stalin with nickels, as the construction of new ships was stopped, and the battlecruisers Moskva and Stalingrad began to be dismantled.

At the same time, Admiral Kuznetsov himself was treated like some random person who took his post due to a bureaucratic misunderstanding that no one understood.

At first they wanted to film him as one of the Stalinist satraps who had drunk on blood during the years of the Stalinist regime. What, say, were those who wanted to deal with him - the same Khrushchev and Zhukov. But nothing happened. No matter how they searched, they did not find a single denunciation signed by the admiral. But on the other hand, they found many documents proving that the commander-in-chief of the fleet was a strange romantic - bold and disinterested, saving, at the risk of his own career and head, people whom, it would seem, he had nothing to do with.

Then they looked to see if any criminal money stuck to the hands of the admiral. Nothing - he lived exclusively on a paycheck, and even that he often donated to the upbringing of orphans of his dead subordinates. They made a covert search at his dacha, as we once did at Zhukov's dacha. The dacha was state-owned, the furniture was also state-owned, and even the only painting, or rather, a copy from Aivazovsky's painting, was also state-owned and had an inventory number.

The people's commissar did not make anything for himself in his position, except for heart disease.

But it was necessary to remove him from his post, since it was difficult and dangerous to work with such an admiral, inspired by the Stalinist task to take away dominance at sea from the Americans, after the death of Stalin himself. Especially considering the enormous authority that Admiral Kuznetsov enjoyed among the personnel of the fleet.

Marshal Zhukov, as usual, brought the standard accusation against Kuznetsov: "There is a mess in the fleet! No discipline! Complete service discrepancy!"

However, there was no more chaos in the navy than in other branches of the armed forces. The discipline was excellent, and there were no emergencies at all.

"No," growled Zhukov, "they will!" He growled this in the face of Kuznetsov in Yalta, where he and Khrushchev called the admiral to be eaten.

Kuznetsov, in a pre-infarction state, left by train for Moscow. It was quite recently - October 27th.

And around midnight on October 29, an explosion thundered under the bottom of the battleship Novorossiysk. The battleship was anchored in the Sevastopol Bay about fifty to seventy meters from the shore. As a result of the panic and confusion reigning on board due to the idiotic orders of the commander of the Black Sea Fleet, Admiral Parkhomenko, who arrived on the ship, the Novorossiysk capsized and sank, killing about nine hundred people. The commander of the Black Sea Fleet himself found himself in the water. But he was not allowed to drown. Pulled out.

Before the echo of this explosion had subsided, Admiral Kuznetsov was removed from his post, dismissed from the armed forces, removed from the Central Committee. Of course, a criminal case was opened against him. Zhukov summoned him to his place and, without hiding his gloating, yelled at the admiral, like a stupid foreman at a violinist drafted into the army. 4

"Did you learn all this from a consultant, Lukic?" I asked in surprise.

"Of course not," Vasily Lukich smiled, "but I learned a lot from the consultant. The rest is from other sources. Thank God, during their service, I have accumulated plenty of these sources.

"Well, then what did you find out?" I looked at the veteran with pleading eyes. Suddenly, this will shut up. He will say, as it happened more than once, they say, you, brother, are not supposed to know this, The topic is painfully delicate.

- Further? Lukich asked. — There were a lot of interesting things.

In principle, there was absolutely no reason for me to go to Sevastopol. It was already clear to me who gave the order to blow up the battleship. But who carried it out remains to be seen. There were still many questions left. In particular, how much Bulganin and Ignatiev were involved in this sabotage, from whom I received this task.

First of all, I wanted to talk to Admiral Kuznetsov, but I had to refuse this. Firstly, the admiral was lying with a heart attack, and secondly, having a criminal case initiated against himself, he would hardly have said much, knowing which department I was representing.

It was possible to interrogate Zhukov. Moreover, we have already met a couple of times when there was a scandal around his dacha, and I interrogated him about this. Even if he just yelled at me and kicked me out of the office, a lot of things would become clear to me. But with this I decided to postpone. It was necessary to get a few more facts, and then climb like this  
high.

A gloomy shadow hung over me the figure of General Ivan Serov, who was about to become Minister of State Security, if he had not already. This man had all the reflexes of a professional killer, and I could have paid with my life before I had time, as they say, to chirp.

The situation was difficult, but my experience and training taught me to work precisely in such conditions, playing on the contradictions of the clans of the party-state nomenklatura that grappled in the struggle for power. This struggle began right in 1917 and did not stop for a minute. And more people died in this struggle than in two world wars. I participated in this war, one might say, from the first day, miraculously survived, but I gained unique experience in avoiding mine traps, which few others could  
boast of.

Therefore, it was quite obvious to me that at the moment two groups were grappling in a deadly battle in the Kremlin.

One of them is led by Khrushchev himself, with Zhukov and Serov as a combat detachment. Bulganin is trying to lead the second, having behind him the recently removed Malenkov and Ignatiev. Perhaps they were trying to bet on Admiral Kuznetsov in this fight, although, as I managed to find out, Bulganin himself hated Admiral Kuznetsov no less than Zhukov.

But it should not be forgotten that Stalin's shadow loomed behind both. Someone wanted to lean on it, and someone - to push off. When dealing with a shadow, both are equally dangerous and adventurous. And I went to Sevastopol.

I arrived there, as I remember now, on November 20. They took me right on the platform. Commandant's patrol - a naval officer, two soldiers and a policeman. They came up to me: "Show me the documents."

I show them my ID - just a KGB one. What Bulganin and Ignatiev had given me, I decided to save until a more important occasion, which, by the way, was not slow to introduce itself.

- What is the purpose of your visit to Sevastopol? the head of the patrol asks.

I was in civilian clothes and arrived on a regular train. If I had listened to Ignatiev and arrived on a special flight, I would be ready to bet that I would not have ended up in Sevastopol at all.

"Did you read the certificate," I ask, "or are you blind?"

"I have an order, Comrade Colonel," the head of the patrol answers, "to detain all suspicious civilians in order to clarify the purpose of their arrival.

"I hope," I say, "that you have dealt with me already?"

"No way," he snuffles, "if you are from the state security, your Sevastopol comrades should have met you. And since they did not meet, then we are obliged to detain you and call these comrades.

I agreed. Why should I roam around an unfamiliar city, and even illegally? None  
meaning.

We left the station, got into a buggy, harnessed by a pair of gentle horses, and drove to the commandant's office.

There I was taken straight to the commandant, a very formidable colonel, whose name I have forgotten.

Why did you come to us? he inquired, fiddling with my certificate in his hands. "If you don't speak, you will have to be sent where you need to be.

It was evident that he spoke automatically, out of habit.

"Send me where I need to be," I asked, so as not to get into a controversy. No one should argue with the commandants of large military bases.

"We'll be there in a moment," the commandant promised, and picked up one of the phones.

"Ivan Timofeevich," he boomed, "here we detained one piece of fruit with your certificate. I wanted to get into the city. Where were they detained? At the railway station. Where did you come from? He says - from Moscow. Very suspicious. What are we going to do with it? We can take him back to the station and send him according to order No. 1047. What's your last name? I'll tell you now.

The colonel took my ID from the table, put on his glasses and read my last name, adding: "It says here that he is a colonel."

I looked at him with curiosity and expected what kind of stupidity he would say to my Sevastopol colleague.

- What? Give him the phone? I give.

He handed me the phone.

- Speak.

— Lukic? I heard a surprised voice on the phone. — It's you, isn't it?

I recognized the voice of my old acquaintance Pavel Sidorovich Zagogulko, who disappeared from the Lubyanka about a month before Stalin's death. It was rumored that he was arrested in the Abakumov case. How he turned into Ivan Timofeevich, I did not begin to find out and good-naturedly answered:

- Of course, it's me, Sidorych. Here I came to relax at the sea, and they immediately grabbed me. Help out.

"I'll send a man now," he said in a voice in which there was no joy at the upcoming meeting with me.

About forty minutes later, a young lieutenant arrived, just a kid, but with a revolver.

"Detained," he turned to me, "you are ordered to be taken to the Office. I warn you that a step to the right or to the left is an attempt to escape and fire will be opened without warning.

Then he put my ID in his pocket, commanded: "Hands back! Go straight!" and led me out into the street, where another bouncer was waiting for us, harnessed by one phlegmatic-looking horse. A policeman was sitting on the reins, and a soldier was dozing in a rattayka, in whose hands was a three-ruler with an attached bayonet. I was seated between the guards, and we went to the Directorate, where they put me in solitary confinement without further ado, but for some reason they did not search me.

About forty minutes later the bell rang and Ivan Timofeevich entered the cell, into which Pavel Sidorovich, my old acquaintance from Lubyanka, turned into. To be honest, I didn't expect it!

Sidorovich was in uniform, and on his shoulders, honest mother - the general's shoulder straps!

"My name is Ivan Timofeevich," he began sharply, "perhaps you are confusing me with someone else, Vasily Lukich. But this is not essential. You must answer the question: for what purpose did you arrive in Sevastopol and on whose instructions?

"Catch a fish," I replied, "in troubled waters.

"Don't be sarcastic," Sidorych-Timofeitch interrupted me, "but answer the questions put to you on the merits." You know very well what happens to those who try to shut themselves up or mislead us.

- Well, you're crazy! I drawled. - You got the general and you don't recognize old friends anymore. I'm with you with all my heart, but you alone put me in and ask some questions. What should I think? A? Nothing good ... I'll have to recall you to Moscow and find out there how you turned from Pavel Sidorovich into Ivan Timofeevich. Did you beat General Telegin during interrogation? It will be very interesting for Zhukov to remember this now ...

"Shut up," shouted Zagogulko, "I'll shoot you!"

"Don't miss," I advised, showing him the certificate issued by Bulganin.

Sidoritch read it, hiccupped and smiled broadly.

— Lukic! he exclaimed happily. - Why are we sitting here? What - there is no better place? The meeting must be marked somehow. How many years have not seen each other! Come to me. To the third floor. You have no idea how happy I am to see you! Do not be offended, brother, that I met you like that. In response to a request from Moscow, they answered that you were fired from the authorities and an all-Union wanted list was declared for you. I understand now. I myself was allegedly imprisoned for twenty-five years, but at least I

I changed my surname, but you stayed the same as you were Lukich.

Lamenting in this way, Sidorych-Timofeich led me into his office, seated me in a rather shabby armchair, and said with unconcealed envy:

"Look how high you flew, Lukich. You work under the Presidium of the Central Committee! Why aren't you a general? Do you still go to the colonels?

"What difference does it make," I waved it off, "a colonel or a general, or I don't know who. Is happiness in the ranks? Comrade Stalin was a generalissimo, but did it help him a lot when a demoted lieutenant colonel shot at him? And now I, a colonel, can now take you general out into the yard and shoot you. Or even without leading out into the yard, but right here. I can order someone, and I can carry it out myself.

"You are all joking," Sidorovich smiled, "you have always been a joker, Lukich. Did they take you upstairs because you worked with Lenin?

This topic, apparently, did not give him rest.

"Perhaps you can intercede for me," he asked, taking a bottle of some foreign liquor from the safe, "eh, Lukich?" Otherwise, they want to turn me away from this place, and then remember my real name and send me to the zone for the entire term. Serov is now eager to become a minister: he will cut everyone's hair who worked with Viktor Semyonovich. Yes, here is the most emergency on me  
want to hang.

And with a sigh, the general poured the brown foreign liquor from the pot-bellied bottle into the glasses.

"Drink," he said, "French cognac." It's called Napoleon. In France, not all millionaires can even afford it. And we smugglers bring to Odessa.

And we drank a glass in one gulp. Nothing special. It looked like a diluted Stark.

"The battleship sank in the bay here," the general grimaced, "even before the November holidays. The saboteurs, they say, did their best - they planted a mine under his bottom. So they want to hang this case on me: why didn't they expose the saboteurs. And it seems to me that this is a complete bullshit. There was such a mess on this battleship that even without any saboteurs, it could explode at any moment.

- And who put forward the version about saboteurs? I asked.

- The political department and the special department of the fleet came up with, - the general moved closer to me, lowering his voice, - there are two wise men sitting there - the Cherkashin brothers - twins: Nikolai and Gennady. One in the political department, the other in a special department. So they are chasing this bucket about saboteurs in order to set me up, and to pull this asshole - Admiral Parkhomenko - out of the shit.

Well, what do you think happened in reality? I kept asking.

— What happened? the general spat directly on the carpet. - They probably smoked in the battle cellar, and extinguished the plane trees on powder charges. That's where it exploded. There, even on the eve of the explosion, some two hundred Chechmeks from the crew were overtaken and settled right under the bow tower. And they, maybe, made a fire to boil tea or fry kebabs. And everyone covered. No one even wrote down their names.

"I hear," I interrupted the general, that the explosion was external, not internal. And the Italians did it.

"Lukic," the general groaned plaintively, "what are you talking about?" You have worked in the authorities all your life. Have you ever seen a real saboteur? What saboteurs? And more Italians! Only the Cherkashin brothers could come up with this! As for the external explosion, there is nothing to say at all. There are a million mines in the bay, not yet etched. Both ours and German. There aren't any! And contact, and magnetic, and multiplicities.

Then he suddenly fell silent and looked at me suspiciously:

"Why are you so interested in all this?" Did you come here for this?

- Do you want to work with me in the Kremlin? I asked instead of answering.

- Want! Timofeich answered without any hesitation, "but what?"

"Then help me figure it out," I said, "who sank this battleship?" You'll be better off. Firstly, all charges will be dropped from you that you missed the saboteurs, and secondly, I will talk about you in the Kremlin so that they take you upstairs as an experienced and proven comrade.

"I'll be grateful to you for the rest of my life, Lukich," the general promised, "and what kind of help do you need from me?"

"The first help that you can give me is to make sure that I am not detained at every step," I asked, "and give me some kind of sensible escort so that I don't get lost in the city and so that I don't get attacked by any some hooligans. I heard that after the amnesty of the fifty-third year, there is a lot of lesson here.

The general looked at me askance, paused, and replied:

- Let's do it! First of all, you need to change into a naval uniform - they will cling less. And what about the escort... How do you like the guy who received you at the commandant's office?

"Nothing," I said, "combat." Does his head work or does he serve in your commandant's company?

"No, no," the general was offended, "could I really send to take a man like you, Lukich, some fool from the commandant's company? Smart boy. If it is necessary, then it can fit anyone in the ear - you will sweat somersaults. In addition, he came to us from the fleet and understands their affairs intelligently.

- Disciplined? I asked.

- But what about, - answered Sidorovich, - whatever they order, he will do everything. Order your own father to be shot - he won't say a word. When we took it, we checked it, as it should be.

"All right," I said, "call him."

The name of the lieutenant was Alexei, and, to be honest, I forgot his last name.

When he saw me, whom he stuffed alone, sitting in the office of the head of the Department, he did not raise an eyebrow. Perhaps he thought he was called in to help beat the necessary evidence out of me.

He stopped at the door, demonstrating his readiness to carry out any command command with his whole appearance.

"Lyosha," said Timofeich, "from this moment until further notice, you will be seconded to a comrade..." He gestured in my direction.

"Call me Vasily Lukich, son," I permitted, "if it is burdensome for you to call me Comrade Colonel."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," the lieutenant drew himself to attention, "resolve the question, Comrade Colonel?"

I nodded my head in agreement.

What will be our activities?

"We will catch saboteurs," I promised, and, seeing how his eyes flashed, I added, "and interrogate them with predilection."

The anticipation of unearthly bliss lit up on the lieutenant's young face. 5

Having changed into a naval uniform, I, taking Lieutenant Lyosha with me as a guide, bodyguard and field investigator, went to a special department of the Black Sea Fleet, which was otherwise called the 3rd department of the fleet headquarters.

On the iron-studded door, which we had difficulty finding, there was no sign other than the traditional "Entrance is strictly prohibited to outsiders." Somewhat away from the door, a bell-button embedded in the wall was lonely.

Lieutenant Lyosha was already trembling with excitement. So he wanted to start interrogating the saboteurs as soon as possible. We walked all the way to the headquarters of the fleet - he told me about his studies at the special school of the MGB, where he was sent on the recommendation of the Komsomol organization of the Danube Flotilla.

"In order to obtain truthful testimony from a person under investigation," the lieutenant shared with me with inspiration, "it is necessary, without asking any specific questions, to hit him in the crotch with a boot. And when he bends - with the edge of the palm along the base of the skull. Only not very much, so as not to die. This puts the defendant in a state of shock, and his blood pressure, increased adrenaline in the blood and acceleration of the general blood flow through the brain cells in themselves dispose him to frankness.

The main thing here is to immediately change tactics, - the lieutenant's eyes rushed to the sky and sentimental notes appeared in his voice, - we must sympathetically ask if he was hurt? Assure that the pain will soon pass, and immediately begin to ask questions in a calm voice. At this point, his blood pressure begins to drop, bringing his general heart activity back to normal, although the pain threshold level is still quite high, All together creating ideal conditions for sincere confession."

The lieutenant was in shock. His creative imagination hovered in the biofield of the tortured defendant, as in paradise:

"The teacher showed us such color graphs and diagrams, designed photographs of the identification of the expression of the eyes and the degree of pain on the screen. This, he said, was trophy material, used by the Gestapo..."

He suddenly fell silent, apparently, he felt that he blurted out too much: for sure, he signed non-disclosure papers.

I, too, am silent, not expressing my attitude to the content of his revelations in any way - these are not my problems.

He quickly calmed down and continued, although not in a hurry and, apparently, thinking over the phrase before saying it:



- By the way, in Moscow, in one research institute, they also work well. The science! Honest Komsomol, I will serve a little more and go to do science. Very interesting! I even came up with a title for my future work: "Creating conditions for optimal frankness between the investigator and the person under investigation, taking into account the presentation of innocence."

- What? - I did not understand, - what kind of innocence? Are you just going to interrogate women?

He blushed.

"So the teacher explained, Comrade Colonel. He said that socialist legality denies the pseudo-scientific bourgeois concept of the "presentation of innocence". But even if this concept is admitted, it does not in the least interfere with the scientifically developed method of interrogation. The main thing is not to give the defendant the opportunity to flaunt his innocence. In science, the foreign word "present" is used, that is, "exhibit". Everything is very simple. While he exposes her, you kick him in the crotch - bang!

"Wait," I interrupted him, "maybe we are talking about the "presumption of innocence"?"

"No," he answered with conviction, "the teacher was talking about the presentation of innocence. I have saved the outline. I can show you, Comrade Colonel.

The young man was not well educated.

- You, Lyokha, that's what, - I said, - without my order, sit quietly and don't swing your legs. We are now going to people who will present us with innocence in full. And you sit still and listen. The main advantage of the investigator is to be able to listen exactly when the presentation of innocence is taking place.

The teacher in their special school was a genius. You have to come up with something like this! I liked it very much. And then they fooled their heads with this presumption of innocence, which no one can really understand. Whether business - presentation of innocence! Everything is clear and understandable!

Therefore, before pressing the call button, I once again took Lyosha on a short leash, saying:

- You promise to sit quietly, without your favorite "Hands back! Step to the right, step to the left!", otherwise I'll leave you waiting in the corridor.

- Honest Komsomol! Lyosha promised. "I won't even open my mouth and won't lift a finger without an order."

I pressed the call button.

The door, upholstered in roofing iron, opened slightly, and a rumpled man of about fifty appeared with a red beard fluffed up like needles of a hedgehog. He was wearing an unbuttoned tunic with shoulder straps of a captain of the 1st rank, thrown over, apparently, after my call.

He gave me a dull look.

- What would you like?

"I want to talk," I replied, showing my small certificate, "with the head of the special department. Specially arrived from the capital.

- It's me, - answered the beard, fastening his tunic, - Cherkashin Nikolai Andreevich.

"Very nice," I said, shaking his hand and walking into the room. "Vasily Lukich."

- And who is this? Cherkashin asked, pointing to Lyosha.

- This is with me, - I explained, - the executioner of sentences and the special investigator.

"Does he have permission to listen to our conversations?" asked Nikolai Andreevich.

"He is deaf and mute after a shell shock," I reassured Cherkashin.

At the table in the room of the special department sat another man in a tunic without shoulder straps with a neatly trimmed beard and a clear look, reminiscent of the holy fool from Surikov's painting.

"This is my twin brother," Cherkashin explained, "the secretary of the joint fleet commission. Helps me on a voluntary basis.

- Cherkashin Gennady Alexandrovich, - the secretary of the party commission introduced himself to me.

I did not begin to find out why one of the twins was Andreevich, and the second - Aleksandrovich, deciding that everything happens in life. Moreover, Aleksandrovich looked fifteen years older than Andreevich. Apparently, party work has aged.

I noticed a long time ago that professional party workers, especially secretaries, always look much older than their years - their work is so hard, and for some reason their eyes always look in different directions.

On the wall hung an ordinary army poster with the call: "Don't talk on the phone, talker - a godsend for a spy!"

I sat down under this poster, and Lyosha sat on a stool by the door, putting his heavy fists on his knees.

- How can we help you? - asked the Cherkashin, who called himself Andreevich.

- What happened to your battleship there? I immediately got down to business. - Did you conduct a preliminary investigation? Moscow is very alarmed. During the war, this did not happen, but here - please!

- The enemy does not sleep! Cherkashin, who was Aleksandrovich, raised his finger instructively.

Brother Andreevich stopped him with a gesture of his hand and turned to me:

Yes, we have investigated. And, except for small details, the picture is completely clear to us, which we have already reported to the team. The battleship became a victim of Italian saboteurs.

— Is that how? I was surprised. - And how did the Italian saboteurs get here? Where did you look?

"Catching saboteurs," Cherkashin, who is Alexandrovich, softly remarked, "is not part of our duties. It is our duty to educate the personnel in the spirit of boundless devotion to the party and the government, to watch over the preservation of military secrets and unhealthy moods. You understand? General Zagolulko should catch saboteurs.

- Exactly, - confirmed Cherkashin, who Andreyevich, - General Zagogulko missed the Italian saboteurs. With him and demand.

- Stop, stop, stop! I interrupted him. - Whom to ask for this, we'll figure it out. For now, answer my question: why did you decide that the Italians blew up the battleship?

He looked condescendingly at me.

"Colonel," he asked, "have you ever heard of the Tenth MAC Flotilla?"

- Fleets of what? I didn't understand.

"MAC fleets," Cherkashin-Andreevich repeated.

"I don't understand anything," I admitted, "what mass?"

- MAC, - Cherkashin said for the third time with noticeable notes of irritation in his voice, - M-A-S. I spell it out - Mikhail Andreevich Suslov.

— Suslov! I jumped up. - And what about Suslov?

"I'm spelling out the abbreviation for you," the voice of the head of the special department broke into a squeal. "If you don't understand!" MAC! Do you understand?

"I understand," I said, "don't be nervous. So this is Comrade Suslov's initiative?"

- No! Cherkashin-Andreevich squealed, "this is MAC. Just MAC.

- And what does it mean? I asked.

"Italian abbreviation," he explained, wiping the sweat that had appeared on his forehead, "it means "anti-submarine motor torpedo boat."

"So why are you dragging the leaders of the party and the government into this business?" I asked.

"You don't understand," Aleksandrovich stood up for Andreevich, "the leaders of the party and the government have nothing to do with this ... An accidental coincidence. We can agree that Nikolai Andreevich chose a not entirely successful decoding of this abbreviation. But we cannot be held responsible for the fact that the Italians have such an abbreviation for the purpose of designating their special unit of underwater saboteurs: the 10th Flotilla MAC.

"Okay," I said, "so the Italians have a special sabotage unit called the 10th MAC flotilla. Go on!

"And the commander of this unit," Cherkashin solemnly declared, "is Prince Borghese.

— Prince? — burst out from me. - A whiteguard?

- Exactly! both brothers confirmed in chorus, and Aleksandrovich added:

- Can you imagine how he must have hated everything Soviet!

- He did not serve with Wrangel? I asked. - I read somewhere that under Wrangel there was also some kind of prince-sailor. He also invented all sorts of things to harm the Soviet government.

"No," brother Aleksandrovich reassured me, "he did not serve with Wrangel. He is an Italian White Guard, served under Mussolini's fascist regime. The 10th MAC flotilla is, in essence, a purely fascist unit. Sort of like sea stormtroopers.

— Oh, that's how! I exclaimed. "So this prince is an Italian fascist?"

"Yes," Cherkashin-Andreevich nodded his head, "a staunch fascist." During the war years, he formed the 10th flotilla ...

During what war years? I didn't understand. — Korean?

- No, - the head of the special department objected irritably, - during the Great Patriotic War. He created his flotilla back in 1940, hating the British only because they entered the war on the side of the Soviet Union.

"Forgive me," I remarked, "but in 1940 the Soviet Union was not yet at war. This I can tell you for sure.

- What's the difference, - shrugged his brother-Aleksandrovich, - the Soviet Union fought or not. All the rest fought precisely because of hatred for the world's first state of workers and peasants.

"You always confuse me with your questions," Brother Andreevich grimaced, "and don't let me present my calculations clearly and consistently.

"I beg your pardon," I apologized, "tell me. We leave all questions for later.

"So," Andreevich continued, "hating everything Soviet, this same prince in December 1941, when the Red Army was smashing the Nazi invaders near Moscow, took and blew up two English battleships.

I wanted to ask how two English battleships ended up near Moscow, but Cherkashin himself explained that this did not happen near Moscow at all, but in the Egyptian port of Alexandria.

"It was done this way," Cherkashin explained, "the submarine delivered specially trained combat swimmers to the base. At night, using special equipment in light diving equipment, they made their way to the inner roadstead, where two English battleships were stationed. Saboteurs attached mines with clockwork to them and surrendered. After that, both battleships exploded.

- Were there many victims? I asked, breaking my vow of silence.

"There were no casualties at all," Cherkashin explained, "but both battleships were out of order for a long time. They sat down on the ground. Luckily, it was shallow.

- How shallow? I asked.

"Eighteen meters," Cherkashin replied, "this is nothing for a battleship.

What was the depth here? I kept asking.

"We got such parsley here," Nikolai Andreevich said, "officially, the depth of the place where the Novorossiysk stood was considered one hundred and seventy-seven meters. The Sevastopol Bay has been in operation for almost two hundred years, and no one knew that there was a double bottom there. Do you know what a double bottom is? A layer of silt is applied, and under it there is an even greater depth to the natural bottom. When the battleship began to capsize, it pressed through the false bottom with its weight and went into the water, so that only the bottom remained on the surface.

"Let's get back to the Italians," I suggested. "Then they, as you say, blew up two English battleships. And the British were not going to hand over these battleships to us?"

"I don't think so," Cherkashin answered somewhat hesitantly, "but it's not a matter of whether they intended to or not. I told you this to demonstrate the method by which Prince Borghese acted. He did the same this time. Released divers, they blew up "Novorossiysk". We have information that a couple of years ago, this same prince, having gathered his accomplices in one of the taverns of Naples, solemnly vowed to wash away from his unit the shame caused by the fact that one of the famous ships of the Italian Royal Navy was captured, "Do not go to ours" Julius Caesar "under the Bolshevik flag!" said the black prince, and his whole gang applauded wildly. Here is the result for you.

"So," I said, "but, as far as I know, the Italian fleet capitulated back in September 1943, and not to us, but to the British and Americans. And we received this ship not from the Italians, but from the former allies in the anti-Hitler coalition. Borghese was supposed to take revenge on them, not on us. We even abandoned this decrepit ship. Why is he so famous that Borghese took such a risk: in peacetime, to commit such a diversion is to provoke a third world war.

- You are forgetting again, - Gennady Alexandrovich intervened in the conversation, - that he is a PRINCE! Prince! You understand? He hates everything Soviet. In addition, we have information that he is married to a Russian countess, whose mansion in Moscow was confiscated by the Soviet authorities. So that personal motives are also possible.

"Recently," Nikolai Andreevich supported his brother, "we received information that Prince Borghese ordered a well-known Italian artist to paint an oil painting "The sinking of the Soviet battleship Novorossiysk by our combat swimmers in Sevastopol." He wants to donate this painting to the Italian Naval Academy in Livorno so that it can be hung in the hall of military glory.

"So," I asked, "the 10th flotilla, formed during the war years, still exists?"

- Formally, it does not exist, - Nikolai Andreevich explained, - it was dissolved after the capitulation of Italy. And even the Anglo-Americans declared the prince himself a war criminal, and he was forced to flee to Latin America.

— Where is he now? - It seemed to me that it was time to connect Lieutenant Lyosha to the conversation.

How do we know where he is now? Brother Andreevich spread his hands. - They don't leave a trace. leave.

"Well, and all these details," I continued to insist, "the performance of Borghese in a tavern, commissioning a painting and all that. Do you have any documentary evidence? Or at least press reports, at worst?"

"This is secret intelligence information," Cherkashin blushed, "received from our intelligence. We cannot show you anything, because the originals of these documents are not with us. His eyes gleamed evilly. "For your information," he continued, "aristocrats often have strange quirks. One of them is the explosion of ships. I am very interested in the history of the fleet and I can give you a few more examples. Have you heard about the sinking of the Russian cruiser Peresvet?"

"No," I admitted, "when did this happen?"

- In January 1917, - answered Nikolai Andreevich, - it was blown up by Count von der Pahlen, who served as a battalion officer on this ship.

What is a "battalion"? I asked, realizing that my knowledge of naval specifics leaves much to be desired.

"A bataler is a storekeeper," explained his brother Alexandrovich, "like a captain in the army. Paint, rags there are different ...

- The count served as a battalion? I was surprised. - And in what rank?

- Conductor, - restraining indignation from my ignorance, brother Andreevich answered, - this approximately corresponds to the current rank of midshipman-over-conscript.

"He is not a relative of that von der Palen," I asked, "who appears among the main conspirators who killed Paul the First?" They read The History of Conspiracies and Revolutions to us at the academy, and I remember this name very well.

"A direct grandson," Nikolai Andreevich confirmed my historical knowledge.

- And served as a storekeeper on a battleship?

"Not on a battleship, but on a cruiser," the twins corrected me in unison.

Okay, cruiser. Storekeeper? Yes, even overtime? I bet you guys are fooling me!

"And Empress Maria?" exclaimed Gennady Alexandrovich. "Don't you know that the Gestapo blew it up right on the same spot where the Novorossiysk died?"

- When is that? I was surprised.

"In September 1916," brother Andreevich blurted triumphantly.

What were the Gestapo men then? I didn't believe again.

— What do you always cling to the details? asked his brother Alexandrovich irritably. - What's the difference, were - were not? Then they were not, then they became. The main thing is that the ship was blown up!

"Well, well," I began to retreat under the combined pressure of the twins, "okay, let's not go into details. But all the examples you cited, even if you take them on faith, took place in wartime, when any sabotage by the enemy even has some shade of heroism in a military operation. But now it's time for peace. In addition, Italy is a NATO country, its armed forces are under the strict control of the United States. The personnel of the 10th flotilla have long been demobilized or transferred to other units, the prince is in exile. But that doesn't matter either. How could the US and NATO take such an action when they finally managed to end the war in Korea, and steps are being taken in the Kremlin to reduce international tension? I'm not talking about the fact that in order to pass to Sevastopol, a submarine with saboteurs had to pass through the Black Sea straits, which are controlled by Turkey, also a member of NATO?

- I would advise you, - Gennady Alexandrovich answered my tirade, - to get acquainted with the party documents. Doesn't it say that the US and NATO are constantly trying to drag the USSR, despite its peace-loving policy, into the third world war. Don't you know that they are the instigators of the third world war? I'm surprised you need

explain such basic things. Are you actually a party member or not? And if you do not like the approach to Sevastopol on a submarine, then another option could be possible. Borghese people could have come here by land. They had already been here during the war years - in the forty-second and forty-third years, having arrived on a convoy and delivered their equipment and boats to Sevastopol. They could bury part of the equipment during the retreat, and then arrive here as tourists or make their way in any way, dig up the equipment, blow up the battleship and leave the same way as they arrived.

- Did any foreigners arrive in Sevastopol on the eve of the disaster? I asked.

"They might not come," Nikolai Andreevich explained for his brother, "but hide here since the war, get fake documents and wait in the wings, which came on the twenty-ninth of October.

This message finally finished me off, I was going, it was, to ask a few more questions; let's say how these same saboteurs hiding since the war, as well as their colleagues who were captured by the allies, managed to maintain the required level of combat and physical training and the like for twelve years, but did not. After all, I was not some visiting correspondent for a central newspaper taking interviews. I was an investigator who was entrusted with investigating the causes of the death of the battleship and hundreds of people.

You probably know that the first mentions in the open press about this catastrophe appeared only fifty years after my arrival in Sevastopol and journalists are still arguing: who, in the end, blew up this old rusty Italian battleship, stuffed to capacity with Russians sailors? But what can become an unsolvable riddle for a journalist for many years, the investigator will find out already in the first day of the investigation.

The story that the Cherkashin brothers told me can be called a classic example of the "presentation of innocence" that Lieutenant Lyosha spoke about, and I once again commended the obscure opera who taught at their MGB special school with a kind word. There is a huge difference between the "presentation of innocence" and the "presumption of innocence".

"Comrades," I turned to the twins, "I apparently made a mistake by not warning you in advance that I was not interviewing you for the newspaper Young Chekist, but interrogating you as witnesses. Therefore, I did not let you sign the documents necessary for this, hoping that such responsible comrades as you would not deliberately mislead the investigation. Now, having listened to your testimony, I have to remind you that a witness is criminally liable both for giving false evidence and for refusing to testify. And I warn you that I can take you into custody right on the spot, without asking anyone for prior permission.

Don't forget where you are! the one who called himself Andreevich exclaimed in falsetto.

But I no longer listened to him, but turning to Lieutenant Lesha, I ordered:

- Lieutenant, it seems to me that the pressure and amount of adrenaline in the blood of these comrades does not at all correspond to the indicators necessary for a frank conversation with the investigator. I ask you to correct these indicators for the optimal course of the investigative process.

Lieutenant Lyosha began to slowly rise from his chair.

Unfortunately, in their special school, practical classes, apparently, were conducted very badly.

Or the purpose of the command was to train pure legal theorists in this special school. Like assistant prosecutors.

I was able to verify this with my own eyes when Lyoshin's boot, whistling through the air, hit not in someone's crotch, but on the table top from below.

Both twins managed to jump back to the wall, the table jumped up, and the inkwell standing on it hit the ceiling, leaving a large and ugly ink stain. Then she fell to the floor with a noise, shattering into fragments like a high-explosive bomb.

Lyosha jumped on one leg, holding on to his bruised leg with his right hand, and with his left hand, trying to unfasten his holster with a revolver. The twins, white with fear, stood huddled against the wall, under a copy of Aivazovsky's painting "Brig" Mercury "after defeating two Turkish ships, joins the squadron of the Black Sea Fleet." I am ready to swear that it was this picture that inspired one of the twins to come up with the composition "Sinking of the Soviet battleship Novorossiysk in Sevastopol" commissioned by Prince Borghese by our combat swimmers. The length of the signature was almost the same.

The difference between a journalistic and a KGB investigation lies not only in the pace of the investigation, but also in the fact that, unlike a journalist, an investigator has no right to believe not only in the implausible, but also in the incredible.

Despite the fact that my special interrogator was temporarily out of order and, having taken off his boot, carefully examined the toes on his right foot, he did his job. Although there was no pain threshold, the pressure and the amount of adrenaline in the blood of the twins came to indicators, if not optimal, then very close to them.

- Who came up with the story with the Italians? I asked, pointing my finger at Andreevich. - You?

"No, not me," he whispered through white lips.

— Who is it? He? and I pointed to Brother Alexandrovich.

Meanwhile, Lyosha put on his boot and reported on combat readiness.

"A directive was sent from Moscow," Nikolai Andreevich admitted at the sight of Lyosha getting up, "for the purpose of ideological education of personnel on a specific example of enemy machinations.

— Who blew up the battleship? I asked.

"I don't know," Cherkashin admitted, "probably a mine." Left over from the war. He, perhaps, hooked her with an anchor when he got up in the roadstead.

"Why," I continued the interrogation, "did the matter immediately turn in the direction of sabotage?" Who ordered this to be done?

"Because it was a sabotage," Aleksandrovich, who had been silent before, exclaimed with conviction, like a fanatic monk from a fire.

Lyosha approached him, clearly intending to increase the pressure under investigation and add adrenaline to the blood, which, combined with the pain threshold, could give good results.

"Take him away," shouted Aleksandrovich, "I'll explain everything to you!"



- Leave it! I commanded Lyosha. "Sit down, lieutenant, and wait for my command!"

- Let him go out into the corridor! Aleksandrovich unexpectedly declared. "I won't say anything in front of him."

- Lyosha, - I ordered, - go out into the corridor, practice on the ballot boxes. Don't let anyone in here.

Lyosha limped out.

"Sit down," I suggested to the twins, "there is no truth in the legs." So I listen to you, Gennady Alexandrovich.

"Colonel," he hissed ominously, "don't you think you'll have to answer for such conduct in an official Navy establishment?"

Lesha's absence immediately gave him courage.

"You know," I answered with Bulganin's gentleness in my voice, "the structure of my subordination in conducting this investigation is unique in its way. At the same time, I am vested with enormous powers, and at the same time I do not bear any responsibility to anyone. I would like you both to understand this correctly. Of course, you have the right to appeal my actions in the manner prescribed by law, but only after testifying. So, I'm listening to you."

This time an amazing picture emerged from what the brothers told. It turns out that the very next day after the disaster, there was a rumor throughout Sevastopol that the Italians had planted a mine under the battleship. But "Italians" in Sevastopol were called some mysterious unit that dug in the Artillery Bay.

The authorities, having caught this rumor and remembering that we got the battleship from Italy, immediately put together a crude legend about the black prince Borghese and his Suslov flotilla.

- So, - I said with a satisfied look of a doctor who was convinced at the autopsy that the diagnosis was correct, - so they blew up the ship? And by whose order?

"I didn't say that they blew up the battleship," said Cherkashin Alexandrovich, stuttering with excitement, "I only conveyed to you the essence of the rumors that were circulating around the city and about the decision of the Main Directorate of the Navy to take advantage of this rumor. More, believe me, Comrade Colonel, I do not know anything."

Here the line has already come, where the "presentation of innocence" ended and the "presumption of innocence" began.

- Do not know? I asked again and turned my gaze to Andreevich. - You know?

"This unit is not subordinate to us," Andreevich mumbled, "it is directly subordinate to the Ministry of Defense."

- That is, Marshal Zhukov? I clarified.

"It turns out that's so," Andreevich agreed, averting his eyes.

Why are they called "Italians" like that? I kept asking.

"They say that the initial training of this unit was taught by Italian instructors taken prisoner during the war," Cherkashin answered, "but I don't know anything for sure. I know it's an underwater demolition training center. The word saboteur is not there."

used.

- But in fact, these are the same underwater saboteurs as the saboteurs of Prince Borghese? I clarified.

"You mean to say," Andreevich opened his eyes wide, "that these are Marshal Zhukov's saboteurs?" Do you understand what you are saying?

"But I didn't say it," I smiled in response, "it was you who used the phrase: 'Zhukov and his saboteurs' [5]. 6

Having torn off a non-disclosure agreement from the twins and promising to pay for the broken inkwell and whitewashing of the ceiling (after all, "state property"), I, accompanied by the limping Lyosha, left the building of the fleet headquarters.

"I almost broke my leg," the lieutenant complained.

- Did you have practical classes at school? I asked.

"No," he admitted, blushing, "just as Stalin died, practical classes were canceled. And in previous releases, practice took almost all of the study time.

- In our business, the main thing is theory, - I consoled him, - and practice will follow. This is a livelihood. Do you have a boat? Or a boat.

- There is a boat, - Lyosha reported, - why do you need it?

"I want to go to the crime scene," I said.

Actually, I had nothing to do at the crime scene. State commissions worked there, and in the given situation neither I nor they could help me in any way. In addition, I was almost officially forbidden to enter into contact with any commissions. But I still wanted to visit the site of a unique state crime. And I decided to do so.

Lyosha, despite being a sailor, deftly managed a small boat.

The huge ship turned upside down with a keel looked like some kind of sea monster, thrown out by wind and waves on a shallow. Hundreds of people were swarming on the bottom, back and forth, calling to each other with horns and sirens, boats and tugboats were scurrying about.

The overturned battleship lay very close to the shore. So close that it was hard to believe in the huge number of victims. Later, I learned that on the fateful night there was no commander on the ship - an old experienced sailor. He would have thrown the ship into the shallows without hesitation, and there would have been no casualties. This could be done with one movement of the machine telegraph. And the confused first officer allowed himself to be fooled by the admiral's orders. The admirals, as always, cared more about saving their own seats than about saving the ship, and even more so people.

The most innocent things in Russia lead to victims unthinkable in any other country, even in Africa.

Having traveled around the dead battleship, the lieutenant turned off the engine.

— Where to now? he asked me.

"To the Artillery Bay," I ordered, "there is some kind of cunning unit that is directly subordinate to Moscow. Do you know anything about it?"

- In Artillery Bay? Lyosha asked. — There is a special school for divers. I have not been there, but I know the cadets from there well. There are hooligans all the time in the city. And patrols are forbidden to take them. Ivan Timofeevich somehow sent our patrols to the city, and we took a couple of people. They took it with difficulty. resisted. Only two were taken, the rest ran away. We filed all the protocols on hooligan behavior in the city, took away the applications from the citizens - everything was rank and file, but from somewhere there was an order to release everyone and continue not to detain. And quite recently - on the first of November - in order not to lie, in the station restaurant they made such a nix that they had to call our squad again, because they stacked all the police in piles.

I myself was sent there at the head of the squad to put things in order. We arrived - noise, din, broken dishes, broken glass - demolition workers are walking. It turns out that they are seeing off two of their colleagues - midshipman Filippenko and chief foreman Buzinov, who are being transferred to the Pacific Ocean. We, remembering the order, did not take anyone away, but only calmed them down. And those two, drunk as hell, were loaded onto the train. I remember that I myself dragged chief foreman Buzinov to the train, and he yelled at me: "Kill, I won't say anything anyway!"

I told him: "Yes, I don't need anything from you, foreman, just don't buzz. Here is your compartment - get some sleep and everything will be all right. That's it. This is a serious audience.

We got ashore about a hundred meters from the fence and went out onto a boring, dusty road leading to a deaf iron gate, decorated with anchors and red stars, where the checkpoint was located.

Despite the ferocious inscriptions on the fence, the checkpoint duty officer greeted us even, one might say, friendly. He held my ID in his hands and asked:

- Did our guys do something in the city again?

- I arrived from Moscow, - I introduced myself, - I would like to talk with the head of the school or the commander of the unit. What is your name?

- With the captain of the first rank Borisenko? the attendant was surprised. "How would you like me to report on you, Comrade Colonel?"

"Report," I ordered, "that a representative of the Extraordinary Commission of the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers of the USSR has come for him, as you could see from reading the documents shown to you.

— Behind him? the attendant asked in confusion. - And report it?

- So report, - I confirmed, - not to him, but behind him!

- Eat! - The duty officer took up the telephone receiver and, throwing wary glances at me, began to say something quickly, covered with sweat.

- Lyosha, - I said to the lieutenant, - you should go for a walk along the shore. There is absolutely nothing for you to do here.

— Comrade Colonel! - Lyosha began in an unhappy voice, - Then I accidentally missed. The center of gravity is incorrectly distributed ...

"Follow orders, lieutenant," I said as sternly as possible, and he, with a sigh, left the premises of the checkpoint duty officer. I just wish this guy lived longer.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged midshipman with a white and blue bandage on his sleeve appeared at the checkpoint. Kozyrnuv, he asked, turning to me: "Are you to the commander of the unit? Follow me".

We passed through a sports town with horizontal bars, rings and bars, heading to the three-story building of the unit's headquarters. Behind him stretched dull one-story barrack-type buildings, where, apparently, classrooms and barracks were located.

On the parade ground, about two dozen sailors were engaged in drill training. But the main life was in full swing near the water, where this part of the coast was securely fenced off from prying eyes with wooden shields, canvas curtains and hulls of sunken ships. On the keel blocks were two miniature submarines and even more outlandish craft resembling torpedoes with two motorcycle-like seats. People were scurrying around.

The commander of the unit, captain 1st rank Borisenko, was pale when I entered his small office, decorated in the old fashioned way with a portrait of Comrade Stalin in a pre-war jacket.

In the eyes of the unit commander, there was nothing that Lieutenant Lyosha called "a presentation of innocence", on the contrary, longing and doom shone in the eyes of Captain 1st Rank Borisenko.

"I knew it," he said when he saw me, "that it was I who would be made the switchman in this business." Although I was guaranteed complete personal safety.

"You yourself must understand," I answered him in a tone, "that guarantees in such a case are worth little. Too loud echo came from the explosion.

- Am I under arrest? Borisenko asked. - Can I call my wife?

"A little later," I promised, "I have a warrant for your arrest, but I did not come at all to arrest you, but to determine the degree of your personal guilt in the catastrophe.

"I'm not guilty of anything," the captain of the 1st rank blurted out, "the word of a communist and an officer, colonel!" I didn't know anything at all!

"Frankly, it's hard to believe," I disagreed, "after all, you equipped Filippenko and Buzinov. They could not begin any action without receiving your order.

He was silent for several minutes, looking at me with fear and surprise.

— Do you know that? he asked in a choked voice. Are they under arrest?

"Of course," I lied, "and they testify. Mainly on you.

- On me? the head of the diving school asked in a hoarse voice. "I suspected that they were ordered to be transferred to the Pacific Ocean so that they could be arrested on the way without interference.

"So it happened," I confirmed, "and who do they blame everything on?" Only on you. They just don't know anyone else... Simple performers.

Will they be shot? Borisenko's face contorted.

"The court will decide that," I answered, "but if they are shot, then, in any case, not the first ... First, they will shoot you, as the one who gave this order.

"These guys are not to blame for anything," Captain Borisenko suddenly turned to shouting, "

not with anything! And I did not give them an order, but passed it on. We are all victims of some kind of provocation!

"But as the commander of the unit that carried out this action, you cannot completely relieve yourself of responsibility," I remarked in a calm voice.

"Listen," said Borisenko, lowering his voice somewhat, "excuse me, I don't know how to address you?"

"If it's difficult for you to address me as Comrade Colonel," I replied, "you can call me Vasily Lukich.

"Vasily Lukich," Captain 1st Rank Borisenko continued in an excited tholos, "I do not relieve myself of any responsibility. But it turns out to be a completely stupid picture.

Imagine that your immediate supervisor would hand you, for example, a bar of chocolate and offer to treat such and such. You would do it, and the one who treated himself would take it and die the next day from poisoning. An investigation began and it would immediately become clear that the deceased received this chocolate bar from you. Everyone saw how you treated him, but no one saw how the boss handed you chocolate. What position would you be in? So I and my subordinates found themselves in the same position.

"Come on," I suggested, "let's not resort to allegories. Better not give me abstract examples, but tell me how it really happened.

"From Moscow," Borisenko began his story, "an officer from the Main Intelligence Directorate arrived. According to the documents, his surname was Fomichev, his rank was colonel. So put it on the record.

"We'll try to do without protocol for the time being," I said. "Go on." So, GRU officer Fomichev arrived from Moscow. Did I understand you correctly?

- Yes, - the commander of the diving school confirmed, - he brought a new set of training magnetic mines and ordered to test these mines for attachment to the bottom of the ship, having carried out the appropriate exercises.

- You said that the mines were training? I asked.

- That's just the point, - confirmed Borisenko, - that they were educational.

- Is a training mine somehow different from a combat one? I kept asking.

"Of course," Borisenko replied, "it is fundamentally different. It is painted in a different color and has a slightly different shape, not to mention the fact that it has a completely different marking. And yes, they are kept separate. There are very strict instructions and guidelines for this.

- So, you have no doubt that the mines brought by Colonel Fomichev are training? - I closely followed the reaction of the head of the diving schools.

"Absolutely no doubt," he assured, "he also brought with him a plan for the exercise and an order to conduct it before the first of November in order to include it in the final figures before the November holidays.

- You said - a plan and an order, - I clarified once again, - who gave this order?

"General Serov," replied Captain Borisenko.

- In oral form? I asked.

- No, - to my great surprise, objected Borisenko, - in writing. As it should be.

— May I have a look at it? I asked.

After hesitating for a moment, Borisenko reached into the safe and took out several pieces of paper with tracing paper pinned to them, and handed them to me: "Please, take a look.

Under the usual headings of "Top Secret" (not even "of special importance"), a plan was presented for the upcoming exercises to mark the upcoming 38th anniversary of the October Revolution. The plan was signed by the head of the GRU Directorate, General Serov I.A.

The exercises were supposed to be carried out in conditions as close as possible to a combat situation, that is, without warning the fleet command about them in advance in order to check the effectiveness of the observation posts of the OVR (Protection of the Water District) and watchmen on ships.

On the scheme of the Sevastopol Bay, the parking lots of ships and the most reliable ways to reach these parking lots by combat swimmers were marked.

The names of the ships written in red ink caught my eye: "Sevastopol", "Novorossiysk", "Kutuzov", "Dashing".

Have similar exercises been carried out before? I asked, looking through the document.

"Every year," Borisenko answered, "such final exercises were always held before the October holidays, drawing a line under the past academic year in terms of combat training.

- And the command of the fleet was never warned about such exercises? I continued to clarify the overall picture of a grandiose provocation.

- As a rule, no, - admitted Borisenko, - at least officially. Unofficially, it seems to me that they always knew about the upcoming exercises, but I'm afraid to say.

"So," I asked, "you do not coordinate your actions either with the command of the fleet, or with the special department of the fleet, or with the local state security agencies?"

"Most often," Borisenko explained, "we coordinate actions with the maritime border guard so that it does not interfere with the exercises according to the approved plan. But in general, these questions - who to inform about the exercises, who not - are decided by the visitor from Moscow. In this case, Colonel Fomichev was such an intermediary. Among other things, it was he who brought the order to transfer Filippenko and Buzinov as instructors to a similar unit in the Pacific Fleet.

- And he set you the task of mining "Novorossiysk" at the upcoming exercises? - I asked the most shocking question in a completely casual voice.

"It was not only about Novorossiysk," Borisenko clarified, "during trial exercises, we usually "mine" almost all large ships located in the bay. And the next night we remove the mines. And only after the exercises, if our command decides so, we inform about

the results of the fleet headquarters. In this case, several groups of demolitionists also had to "mine" other ships. Colonel Fomichev himself set them tasks. In particular, it was he who ordered the installation of training mines of a new type under Novorossiysk and instructed the most experienced demolition workers to do this: midshipman Filippenko and chief foreman Buzinov.

When we learned about the explosion, believe me, Vasily Lukich, everyone went into shock. I called Moscow myself to talk to Fomichev. But this failed, and my immediate supervisor told me: "Sit quietly until we all have their heads screwed off."

"How simple everything is," I thought, "and clumsily." However, this is exactly what I assumed, while still in Moscow. Serov ordered. And who could order Serov? Only Zhukov, Khrushchev and Bulganin. Or all together.

I wanted to force the captain of the 1st rank Borisenko to state everything that was said to me in writing, but I thought: "Why do I need this?" And did not. I feel sorry for him and myself.

- Should I follow you? asked the captain of the 1st rank, when I was about to leave.

"Not yet," I said, "you convinced me of your innocence. If you need  
we will call you.

But just in case, he tore off a non-disclosure agreement from him, which he tore up and threw away as soon as he left the gate of the unit. 7

"Lukic," I asked, "it turns out that you have been investigating a story in a day, over the solution of which modern experts and journalists are beating like flies against glass?"

"Not in a day, of course," Lukich admitted, "I told you everything in a somewhat simplified way. I had to tinker a little, various small problems arose, not without it. But in general, everything was cleared up quickly. There is nothing to hide here - the investigation was not very complicated. Moreover, I imagined the overall picture quite clearly when I went to Sevastopol. And when you imagine correctly the general picture of the incident, the details themselves will be applied very quickly.

"But I still don't understand," I said, "why did they choose the Novorossiysk for this sabotage when the harbor was full of other ships?" Why did this colonel from Moscow do everything to ensure that these mines were laid under "Novorossiysk"?

- What is not clear here? - Vasily Lukich was surprised, - "Novorossiysk" was chosen precisely because it did not represent absolutely any combat value. He had already been actually scrapped. Shortly before this, the State of Emergency Marine Technical Committee issued a second opinion on the unfitness of the ship for operation. Of course, at the same time, such a number of victims was not planned at all. They needed a high-profile state of emergency in order to expel Kuznetsov and cut down the program of the ocean fleet. Zhukov and Khrushchev were equally illiterate, and human lives meant little to them.

But in this case, the calculation was that the ship would simply land on the ground near the shore. Well, a couple of people will die there, this will be enough to deal with Admiral Kuznetsov and all the romance of marine painting. And since such a number of victims happened, it plays into their hands even more. Admiral Kuznetsov was dealt with quickly, easily and without much fuss. And then they began to destroy the fleet. Many people remember how already fully completed new ships were scrapped, not to mention those that had not been completed by that time.

- And what happened next? I asked.

- Further? Lukich asked. - Further, in February 1956, as you probably know, the XX Party Congress was held, at which Khrushchev's so-called "secret" speech was made, exposing Stalin and "Stalinism." But this is not the most important thing. The main thing is that at the congress, albeit formally, the Bolshevik Party was destroyed. The CPSU(b) ceased to exist, replaced by the completely uninspiring abbreviation CPSU. This was the beginning of the end. This act officially recognized the end of the era of the great experiment, or the great campaign, as you like. They admitted that both failed.

"Understood," I admitted, "but what does Admiral Kuznetsov have to do with it?"

"In every business," explained Lukich, "the most dangerous are not the fanatics, but the romantics. And Kuznetsov was such a romantic of a great idea, in contrast to land marshals mired in luxury and intrigues, who, without batting an eyelid, wiped their feet on the corpse of Comrade Stalin. None of them even uttered a peep when the great leader was dipped in shit at the congress.

— And Kuznetsov? I asked. "Did he try to do anything after the death of the Generalissimo?"

"Nothing can be done against death," Vasily Lukich remarked edifyingly, "but he hoped that the romantic idea that inspired Comrade Stalin during his lifetime would live on. Namely, this idea turned out to be the most dangerous, which the admiral could not understand.

"And I don't understand," I admitted, "what does this romantic idea have to do with it.

"Besides," explained Lukich, "the Americans can only be defeated at sea. Otherwise, they cannot be defeated. Therefore, first of all, it was necessary to curtail the military shipbuilding program and disperse the romantics. Which they did. And then they got down to everything rest.

— No, Lukic, — I said, — I can't seem to rise to the level of your global geopolitical calculations. Let's get back to the Novorossiysk explosion. How did such a catastrophe manage to be hidden from the public, from the country?

- What was special about her? the veteran wondered. - Yes, such disasters in our country happened and happen almost every week. The battleship sank, and two weeks later an elevator in Rostov-on-Don burned down with a year's supply of grain. One hundred and thirty people died. And the thing was that it was necessary to remove one secretary of the regional committee, and install another. Or, say, in Siberia, due to the leakage of poisons in the production of chemical weapons, seven or eight large villages - twenty thousand people - became extinct. And it turned out that it was a showdown, it's ridiculous to say, at the level of the local regional committee. There was a struggle for the position of general director, only! These are our methods.

Comrade Shcherbitsky did not like some of Gorbachev's steps - and who liked them at the level of the kondo nomenclature - right there, please, the reactor at Chernobyl exploded. Yes, there are many such examples. Starting from the seventeenth year, only a list of such catastrophes would fill a book of five thousand pages of the most compact text. So, against this background, the death of some decrepit battleship, even with several hundred casualties, to remove the almost legendary commander-in-chief from the post can be considered a childish prank. They could destroy the entire fleet and burn Sevastopol along with Kronstadt.

"Well, okay," I agreed, "but now, when forty years later it is finally allowed to talk about it, new versions have appeared in which they are trying to prove one thing: the explosion of the battleship was carried out by Italian saboteurs only because the battleship was Italian-built.



"Yes, yes," Lukich perked up, "I have read several publications. Most of them were written by some Cherkashin. Or the same, or maybe one of his descendants. We will never have enough Cherkashins. "This is our people," Vasily Lukich will continue, "he is ready to believe in the most incredible tales about the black prince Borghese and his thugs from the tenth flotilla, than to understand that he, the people, exists only as an expendable material during political games in Kremlin and around it. Exists for extermination. He has no other tasks.

When I returned from Sevastopol, as I was instructed, I did not report anything to anyone and went on to lecture in the "Knowledge" society. But soon I had to meet General Serov.

"Well, you're lucky, Lukich," he said, "that I missed your visit to Sevastopol then." You would never have come to Sevastopol with me. And when Zagogulko reported to me that you were in the city, I thought, thought, and waved my hand. Okay, I think. Lukic can. Let him understand. You know such secrets, brother, that one more, one less - what's the difference? But you're doing well, Lukic, then quickly figured out, I did not even expect.

— Yes, what's so difficult? I objected modestly, "after all, everything is sewn with white thread, Ivan Alexandrovich. Anyone in my place would understand.

"Anyone," the general mimicked me, "yes, as soon as the first word was said, anyone would immediately find himself at the bottom of the bay with a seal in the back of his head and a weight on his legs. The young one who walked around the city with you was only waiting for this signal. Yes, he didn't wait, because he himself had to be shot when they took Zagogulka. And you must admit, Lukich, did we work well with this battleship?

"Nothing good," I objected, "clumsily. Yes, I feel sorry for the young guys.

"You've become compassionate for some reason, Lukich," Serov muttered displeasedly, "what died there?" Less than a thousand people. Why pity them? Women give birth to new ones, as Comrade Stalin said. And the ship was already scrapped. So the Motherland received the metal. What's the difference - so cut it or bottom up. The amount of steel from this will not decrease.

I said nothing. Before the war, Serov commanded an execution company. He has his own logic.

- Did you manage to meet Zhukov? I asked.

"Later," Lukich replied, "after Khrushchev removed him from his post in 1958." Zhukov was on an official visit to Yugoslavia. And while he was there, he was removed from his post ... And when he returned at the airport, almost a whole regiment of the KGB was waiting for him. But the rules required that one of the members, or at least candidate members of the Politburo, be present in order to read to the marshal the decision to remove him from office. All, of course, crumbled. They sent Katya Furtseva, who at that time was thrown to strengthen social culture. She was a minister of culture and a candidate member of the Politburo. Baba is fighting. She started with us as a warden in the internal prison on Lubyanka, then she was an opera in the women's zone, and later switched to party work.

Zhukov listened to her, took off his marshal's cap, put it on Katerina's head and said: "Okay, now you are in command" and went into disgrace for the rest of his life.

Katya called me and said:

- Lukich, be a friend, take Marshal Zhukov's cap. And it's uncomfortable, where is she to me? Or maybe conversations will begin that I stole the cap from the marshal without the decision of the Politburo.

"All right, Katya," I say, "I'll take you out of old friendship. Will they let me go to his dacha?"

"I'll write you a special pass," she promised.

I went. By the time I arrived, the documents were checked five times. At one post they even asked why I was going, for what such a need? How to get to Napoleon on the island of St. Helena.

I honestly said, they say, I take the cap to the marshal and in general, guys, this is none of your business. About five years ago you could be slapped for such questions, and even now do not think that you can open your mouth whenever you like.

I arrived. Zhukov was terribly frightened at the sight of me. I interrogated him when the junk looted by trucks was taken out of the dacha in the forty-sixth.

"What happened again, Vassily Lukich?" he asked when I entered. "Still, they took it from me, didn't leave anything, not even an orderly. What did you come?"

- The cap, - I say, - to return to you, Comrade Marshal ... The cap, which you illegally gave to Comrade Furtseva. Comrade Furtseva does not need it at all. Get it and sign up.

Word for word, we started talking, and I asked about Novorossiysk.

"No," said Zhukov, "are you sane, Vassily Lukich?" I did not give such an order. I then ordered Serov to provide conditions for the removal of Kuznetsov from his post. And I never ordered to blow something up or something like that. Yes, you yourself know, Vasily Lukich, that such orders are never given, but only carried out. And why? You look at the documents, Lukich, if you have a permit. Every day something exploded or sank there even without me. But you understand as well as I do that Kuznetsov had to be removed from his post urgently.

- Why? I asked the marshal innocently, hoping to learn something new.

- You do not know? - the marshal was sincerely surprised, - So I'll tell you.

Nikita Sergeevich wanted to attach Lenya Brezhnev from Moldova to him as the head of the GlavPUR of the fleet. But Kuznetsov did not take it. "I," he said, "do not need firefighters!" Nikita Sergeevich, of course, was offended and ordered me: "This Stalinist pet must be removed." And I instructed Serov, That's all.

Immediately after that, I left Zhukov, politely apologized, said that I was in a hurry and left.

We never saw him again, Marshal was already old. Older than his own mother-in-law by seven years. It was high time for him to sit down for his memoirs.

- Do you understand everything now? Vassily Lukich asked me.

"In principle, yes," I replied, "except for one thing. If you are right, then how did they allow us to rivet such a fleet in the Brezhnev era? After all, we built and built until the collapse of the Union!"

"In those years, it no longer mattered," Lukich shrugged, "while we were riveting ships and tanks, the enemy came up with fundamentally new methods of crushing.

What other new methods? I didn't understand.

"One Chinese philosopher said," Lukich narrowed his eyes slyly, "that even winning one

battle after another throughout your life, you cannot call yourself a Great General. For only one who crushes the enemy without resorting to battles can be considered a Great commander. That's what they did to us in 1991. So, whether we had saved the battleship Novorossiysk or not, it would not have been of fundamental importance.

NOTE: All names in this essay are fictitious. Any similarity is possible only by chance, although Vasily Lukich knows all the real names that he did not allow to be published for ethical reasons.

## ORDER FOR PERSONAL COURAGE

This happened at the end of March 1996. For several days I tried in vain to get through to Vasily Lukich and became seriously worried. Lukich is already 92 years old. Although he looked great, was still youthful and fit, 92 years old is much more than seventy. Nothing to add or subtract here. Where could he have gone? At first I thought that Lukich's phone had broken, and called the station. There I was assured that the phone is working, just no one approaches it.

Then I went to Lukich's and pressed the bell button for fifteen minutes. My imagination painted the most terrible pictures: the dead Lukich was sitting in his favorite armchair with the TV turned on. Or lying in the bath. Or in the kitchen. And the gas is distributed throughout the apartment. I was about to call the police and ask them to open the apartment, when a woman from a neighboring apartment came out to my ringing and said:

— Are you visiting Vasily Lukich? He left.

- Where did you go? I asked. "He wasn't going anywhere.

"Well, I really don't know," the woman answered, "I myself saw how he went down the stairs, accompanied by three young people, and at the entrance there was a car the size of a tram.

And the woman spread her hands, showing how big the car that came after him was.

"My God! I thought, trembling with fear. "Lukic has been arrested!" As soon as we published his first stories, the authorities immediately figured out their veteran and took action.

The times were very confusing. The presidential elections were approaching. Various semi-fascist and Nazi groups, declaring themselves the legal successors of the CPSU and putting up red banners for camouflage and veterans little versed in the intricacies of the pre-election fuss, rushed to power. The faceless face of their single presidential candidate flickered like an ominous omen at rallies, press conferences and, even more so, on television screens.

The Chechen war flared for the second year. Russian troops with artillery, aircraft and multiple rocket launchers wiped Chechen villages off the face of the earth along with civilians, trying to hide the fact of their defeat in the war on their own territory with their own people. The government, having barricaded itself in the Kremlin, came up with a new way to fight inflation by stopping the payment of salaries to all state employees, from teachers to employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The Duma beat the government below the belt, approving populist bills to raise

pensions and salaries, passing idiotic regulations that forced the governments of almost all countries to take emergency measures in case of resuscitation of a dinosaur with a hammer and sickle.

Captured by those who called themselves communists, the Duma agonized loudly, emitting the stinking smell of decay all over the world.

In such an environment, anything could happen.

Old fears resurfaced in me. I rushed home, collected all the materials related to the stories of Vasily Lukich, and hid them in a hiding place in case they came to me with a search.

I could not find a place for myself, every day several times calling Vasily Lukich, because hope, as you know, dies last. The long intermittent beeps that were heard in the telephone receiver dug into my brain like red-hot nails. And when they unexpectedly answered on the other end of the wire, I did not even immediately react.

Lukic repeated at least three times: "Hello! Listen to you!" before I literally yelled a good obscenity:

— Lukic! It's you?

"Me," the veteran replied calmly. - what are you yelling at?

- Where have you been? Where had you been? I continued to ask in a broken voice.

"He was absent," Vassily Lukich answered evasively. - Why are you so upset?

"Well, then," I began to articulate my displeasure in a confused voice, "you disappear somewhere, you didn't warn me about anything, of course I don't know what to think anymore!"

"Am I supposed to report to you?" Lukich grumbled displeasedly. - Also, the warden turned up for me. Snotlout still me notations to read.

I was offended.

"All right," Lukich said conciliatorily, "you must have buried me already?" It's not time yet. Come by sometime during the week. No offense.

The next morning, taking a taxi, I rushed to Vasily Lukich.

He was still the same - tall, fit, smiling mockingly. The first thing I saw when I entered the room was the Order of Personal Courage lying on the table, recently established by presidential decree and becoming something like the old Medal of Courage. In any case, they award this order, like that medal, just as often and almost everyone in a row.

"Lukich," I asked, "have you been to Chechnya?"

"The only thing missing was me," Vassily Lukich laughed. We would have won right away.  
I appear there.

— Yes, where were you? I pleaded. And where did this order come from?

— Where was it? asked Vasily Lukich thoughtfully. "You know, one of those strange stories happened to me again that have haunted me for virtually the entire life.

"Take it higher," Lukich raised his right hand and pointed to the sky.

— Zyuganov? I stared at him in surprise.

— Yes, what are you talking about? Zyuganov! Yes, they won't let him get shot at these cases. Do not guess, but rather listen.

Somehow recently our chairman of the Council of Veterans came up to me. He is twenty years younger than me, but an intelligent, managerial man, one of the former economic generals. Such a grated kalach - you won't go around, you won't slip through. But, on the other hand, he knows the service: he won't ask a single unnecessary question, he won't utter a single superfluous word.

"Vasily Lukich," he says to me, "wouldn't you like to go to a rest home, relax a little in nature. The ticket is on fire, because it's not the season. And look, what grace is around - the sun, the frost is moderate, no mosquitoes for you, no flies. Live, rest and rejoice!" "No," I shrug it off, "what kind of rest home is there. My pension is barely enough to live on, but there is no more for a ticket."

"Yes, don't worry," the chairman lowers his voice, "the veteran's ticket is completely free. And they will bring it, and they will take it at public expense. Like in the zone," and he winks.

"Yes, where is such a paradise formed in our time?" I'm interested.

"In Barvikha," the chairman answers, "in the former sanatorium of the Central Committee. I, when I worked in the "nine", Grishin there, I remember, drove. So they wouldn't let me in there forever. Well, I'll tell you, Lukic - yes! You never dreamed of such a thing.

Compared to our old Lubyanka sanatorium, it is a hut in a strict regime zone.

"And how much do they charge for food?" I ask. "They don't charge at all," the chairman assures, "everything is free.

"Okay," I answer, "I persuaded him. Give a ticket, the fool is with you."

"You, Lukich, go home," says the chairman, and tomorrow, before twelve, they will come and take you away. And you collect some junk there: a toothbrush, a razor there and all that stuff. They assure me that they give out toothbrushes there too, but to be honest, Lukic, I don't believe in it myself."

I returned home, collected a brush, toothpaste, a soap dish and an electric razor. Indeed, somewhere around half past eleven - a long ring at the door. I open three. Pumped up healthy guys. One is wearing a mask.

"So-and-so?" they ask.

"Yes," I answer.

"Get ready," they say, "you will go with us."

Not at all like the servants of a holiday home. Is that a state-owned house.

I'm timid here and ask;

"Where are we going?"

"You'll find out there! says the elder, "for now, don't ask questions!"

"Yes," I think, "it's good now to go to veterans' rest homes. The service is such that you will remember all your fighting youth!"

Let's go, we left Moscow along some ideal route. We don't drive, we fly straight. No potholes for you, no potholes. And all around the fir trees sparkle with a light hoarfrost - beauties!

We drive up to the barrier. Five in camouflage with machine guns. On the side of the road - an armored personnel carrier, around - some fellows in masks and bulletproof vests, hung with weapons.

"Fathers, I think, where are they taking me? Are veterans' rest homes really protected like that these days? Not otherwise - they are afraid that during the next raid, Shamil Basayev will choose not a hospital, but a rest home for veterans of the Cheka-NKVD."

I see a palace ahead, surrounded by an old fence. Along the fence - again, hefty men in masks and body armor with machine guns at the ready.

We entered the gate. The one in the mask got out of the car and opened the door for me:

"Get out of the car!"

"Put your hands on your head?" I ask.

"No need for jokes! he interrupts. We are in the service, not playing with toys. Come out. Now you will be taken care of."

I went out, I looked - a veranda under a light colonnade, a beautiful two-flight staircase goes to it. And suddenly ... a whole constellation of young girls in white coats runs down this staircase right in a stream. And in front is an older lady, plump, also in a white coat, reminiscent of my old acquaintance, the Stalinist Matryona Ivanovna.

"Vasily Lukich," they chirped in unison, "how glad we are to see you here, Vasily Lukich! Be our dear guest!"

And they lead me, stunned, into the ward. The chamber is not in the sense of a hospital designation, but, as they used to say, the royal chamber. I've never seen beds like this in my life - like a helipad. All sorts of armchairs, walls - eyes run wide.

"Here," the girls chirp, "the bath, Vasily Lukich, there are other amenities. Here is the menu for tomorrow. Are you a diabetic? What is contraindicated for you? Over there, on the other side, is the swimming pool. If you know how to ride, there are horses. Make yourself comfortable... If you want to eat, press this bell, order whatever you like, they will bring it to you. This room next to the bedroom is the dining room. Services - in the sideboard, if you want a drink - here in this bar is a small set of vintage drinks. The next room is the living room."

An older lady enters into a conversation: "If you feel bad, then call me. I'm here around the clock. I'll make an injection for you, everything will be removed as if by hand!" This is where I got scared. As I looked at her, I immediately realized that this one, without batting an eyelid, would put me to sleep like an old bulldog.

"Excuse me," I ask, "by any chance, is your name Matryona Ivanovna?"

"No," she laughs, "my name is Matilda Ivanovna. But my mother, indeed, was called Matryona Ivanovna. Were you familiar?"

"I knew," I answer, "I had to meet several times."

And I myself think: did I not get here just to fall asleep for my too long tongue? The only thing that reassured me was that a more modest room could be used for such a purpose.

find. And on such a bunk, it's even a shame to die. I will lie on it like a Roman emperor. And the girls in white robes will sing the waste in chorus.

No, I thought, it's something else. They could also put me to sleep in the district polyclinic, if ordered.

"So this is a holiday home?" I ask.

"Yes," Matilda Ivanovna nods, "an exemplary holiday home for the Federal Security Service. And I am a housewife. I can give any injection as prescribed."

"No, no," I say, "I didn't give injections when I was born, even in civilian life. And now I don't want to."

"Are you afraid of the prickers? Matilda Ivanovna smiles. - And in vain. They sent us a wonderful remedy, American, through sister departments, it cleans and rejuvenates the vessels. And if you don't want an injection, I can offer you pills. And she looks, narrowing her eyes in the same way as her legendary mother, when she thought about how to send a person to the next world - with an injection or a pill, if they decided to save a cartridge on it.

"I am healthy, Matilda Ivanovna," I answer, "thank God, I don't need any medical help." "That's nice," Matilda Ivanovna agrees, "otherwise I see that your years are not small, Vasily Lukich, maybe something is bothering you, I wanted to know. And so - relax, swim in the pool, walk in the park."

"Am I, alone here resting," I inquire, "or is anyone else present?"

"So far, one," says Matilda Ivanovna, "the rest have not yet arrived. But don't worry - it won't be boring. Everything is here for a good time: a TV, a video recorder, cassettes for it are on this shelf; on the second floor there is a library, a billiard room and much more. Get comfortable."

I live here for a day or two, eat, drink, sleep, walk in the park. Rest, in a word. And I don't even know how long my ticket was issued for. I asked Matilda Ivanovna, and she said to me:

"You have no deadline, Vasily Lukich. We'll tell you when enough is enough. At your age, our microclimate does not last very long. In vain you do not want to undergo procedures ... "

"No," I think, "I won't ask any more questions. As if no one is going to kill me, but the impression is complete that they put me under house arrest. I wanted to check it out and tried to get out of the territory. Nothing came of it, of course. They detained me, though, I won't lie, they turned back very politely."

"Are you lost, Vasily Lukich? You need to get out there."

"I need to go to Moscow," I say.

"After the end of the term, Vasily Lukich, we will definitely take you to Moscow, but for now your term has not yet ended."

"What is my deadline?" I'm interested.

"You should know me better," says the guard at the gate, "I didn't write out the deadline for you."

Immediately Matilda Ivanovna caught me:

"Are you, they say, lost your way, Vasily Lukich? Still, sclerosis overcomes. Vessels should be expanded ... "

"In, - I think, - I got stuck. And where to go?"

After dinner I went to the park for a walk. The park is big. Somewhere I'll probably find a hole, I'll run away. I still have strength, I'll get to the station, and there it's already a stone's throw to Moscow.

Nothing happened. I have never seen a rest home, even from our department, guarded more than a zone of especially strict regime!

I walk back along the alley to the palace, I see a man walking towards me. Fifty years, maybe a little less. In an Adidas tracksuit, in a light sports jacket over the suit and in a knitted cap with a pompom on top. And next to him is a hefty dog running - a German shepherd.

I look from a distance - a familiar face. Well, for sure, I saw him somewhere and more than once, but I can't remember. Sclerosis! It would be necessary, I think, really, to make an injection!

We caught up and suddenly this same man says to me:

"Hello, Vasily Lukich!"

"Hello," I answer, "if you are not joking."

"Well, how do you like it with us," he asks, "do you like it?"

"Nothing," I say, "just not enough people."

"Do you need people? - he is surprised, - for me, the less people, the less trouble. Therefore, I forbade anyone to appear on this territory without special permission."

"Lord," I think, "but who is this? The face is familiar - isn't it a local boss? But where could I see him? I haven't been here, I haven't brought anyone here. He was not visiting me. Can't remember what you want to do! And he took his dog on a leash and says, taking my arm:

"The comrade here wants to talk to you alone, Vasily Lukich. Don't refuse him this favor. Come with me."

During this time, without communicating with anyone except Matilda Ivanovna, I became a little wild and needed to communicate myself. Why not talk to a person, if he has a desire? Maybe the conversation will turn out to be even very interesting? What else can I do at my age in a rest home? Only talk. Yes, but there was no one with him.

Therefore, I obediently allowed myself to be led to some side door in the left wing of the palace. My companion, with a practiced movement of his fingers, pressed the buttons of the digital lock and opened the door. We found ourselves in a small waiting room, where three guys in camouflage were sitting in the corners, holding machine guns on their knees.

At the sight of us, they jumped up and stretched out at attention.

However, my companion did not even deign to look at them, but only handed over to one of them the leash along with the shepherd dog.

"I think, Vasily Lukich," he turned to me, "we'll undress here, otherwise we'll talk in jackets ... you understand ..."



We undressed and, passing through several rooms on the first floor, each of which had two or three guards, climbed the elegant stairs to the second floor and found ourselves in a cozy, tastefully furnished room, where the color of greenish tones prevailed - from wallpaper to furniture.

There were three chairs around a low round table. One of them was noticeably larger than the others, the armrests in the form of lion paws were gilded, and the high back was decorated with a gold bas-relief in the form of a double-headed eagle.

It crossed my mind that this chair too obviously claims to be a throne, not a chair, but at first I did not attach any importance to this.

My companion seated me in one of the small chairs and said:

"Wait five minutes here, Vasily Lukich. I'll be right back." And darted through a side door that I didn't notice at first.

Indeed, less than five minutes had passed before I heard a voice resounding behind the loosely closed door into which my companion had disappeared. All of Russia knew this voice well.

"Well, what are you, you understand, in nature," the voice said, "I said clearly, you understand what needs to be done! And you play like toys!"

"Boris Nikolaevich[6]," the voice of my companion rang out, "everything will be done as you ordered. Do not be angry."

"Yes, I'm not angry, you understand," Boris Nikolaevich replied displeasedly, "don't be angry, it's all the same. It will be worse for you if I invite Niyazov."

Now it's all clear to me! As in a crossword puzzle, when a correctly guessed word gives answers in many directions, so I, having heard the voice of our president, instantly everything

Understood.

Well, of course, this is not a rest home, but his residence. He needed me for something, but he could not say exactly when he would appear in this palace, and I was brought here in advance. And I immediately remembered where I saw the man who led me to the building, whom I met, supposedly by chance, during a walk in the park.

I saw this man on TV. This was the famous General Korzhakov, the head of the presidential security service, "politician No. 2" in all the numerous ratings of the most influential people in Yeltsin's entourage, and the "head of the palace guards," as some discrediting newspapers called him.

Well, our chairman of veterans made me feel good in my old age! After all, the scoundrel knew where he was sending me! "Take a ticket, Lukich, have a rest, you won't regret it!" And I'm an old fool, I bought it. Everyone wants to believe in some kind of miracles, although you know for sure that miracles do not happen.

Meanwhile, the door opened, and the President entered the room, accompanied by the faithful Korzhakov.

He did not even enter, but rather filled the whole room with himself. From his huge bearish figure it became somehow cramped.

"Excuse me, Vasily Lukich," Yeltsin boomed, spreading his arms and smiling, "sorry for keeping you waiting. Things, you know, a lot!"

Before I had time to figure out what it was about, the president apologizes for forcing

to wait for me today for five minutes, or he meant almost a week spent by me here, as he approached me almost close, hugged me and kissed me three times. Then he pulled away, looked at me attentively, and, turning to Korzhakov, declared:

"What, you know, well done! Look, Korzhakov is ninety-two years old. Here it is Russia. Here they are - Russian heroes! You, Vasily Lukich, are Great Russia!"

"Yes," I agreed, "I am Boris Nikolayevich, Great Russia. I'll just die soon."

"Why is that? the President frowned. "Why are you going to die, Vassily Lukich?" No, we won't let you do that. Am I right, Korzhakov? Shall we not let Vassily Lukich die?"

"We won't allow it, Boris Nikolaevich," the head of the security service confirmed.

"That's it!" the President rejoiced.

Then he looked around, put his hand into his jacket pocket, pulled out a small red box and handed it to me.

"Accept," he said, "dear Vasily Lukich, this is as a token of my personal admiration for you and your heroic biography."

I thanked him and put the box in my pocket.

The President and Korzhakov looked at each other.

"You didn't even look at what was there."

"I know what is there, thank you, Boris Nikolaevich. But I was invited here not only to present the order?"

"What does school mean! the president remarked admiringly. - Everything, you know, flogs! Learn, Korzhakov! They say, Vasily Lukich," he turned to me, "that you and Lenin himself had to meet?"

"I had to," I confirmed, "more than once."

"Did you serve as his guard?" Korzhakov interjected respectfully.

"You could say that," I agreed, "although it's not entirely accurate."

"We know a lot about you," Yeltsin said, "and we have heard even more about you. Epics are composed about you, as about Ilya Muromets, Vasily Lukich. There is even a version that it was you who overthrew the Stalinist regime in 1953."

"This is an exaggeration," I smiled, "I never saw Comrade Stalin."

"And then for many years you were a professor of political history at Moscow University?" Korzhakov asked.

"That's right," I said, "I'm still listed as a consultant there."

"Do you write anything yourself?" Korzhakov asked, shooting a glance at the president.

"God forbid! I confessed. - The forces are not the same. In my life, I did not write anything except a dissertation in the postgraduate course of the academy."

"And what was the topic of your dissertation, Vasily Lukich?" asked the head of security.

"The theory of a political conspiracy within the framework of Comrade Stalin's thesis about the intensification of the class struggle as we advance towards socialism," I explained. By this time, Comrade Stalin had developed a new theory that on the way from socialism to communism, the class struggle would intensify even more as society became classless. It was a brilliant idea. Only premature death prevented Comrade Stalin from putting this new social law into practice."

"Where can I find your dissertation?" asked Korzhakov, looking at me frowningly.

"I'm afraid not," I replied, "the dissertation was secret and remained in the archives of the academy. I remember that thirty years or even more ago, one of the librarians of the academy called me and said that my dissertation had been declassified and therefore was subject to destruction. He offered me to pick her up if I had such a desire. But I refused. So she was burned."

Here I lied. The dissertation was with me, and I even re-read it from time to time. That librarian died and there is no end to be found, even if they want to, because in the early sixties there was an order to destroy all scientific works based on the theoretical calculations of Comrade Stalin. I didn't want to give them my dissertation. After my death, please. Yes, and they would not understand anything in it.

Comrade Stalin used terminology unusual for the whole world: classes, ruling classes, opportunists, deviators, masses of the people, the road to socialism, the road from socialism to communism, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, bourgeois nationalists and the like.

He did not come up with this terminology himself, but learned from two schizophrenic romantics - Marx and Lenin ... And if someone translated his works into the language of generally understandable human terms, replacing, say, the ruling classes with "elites", calling bourgeois nationalists simply "nationalists", and the masses of the people as "taxpayers", then it would turn out to be a good political science work.

It would follow from it that with the movement of any society, united in a state, along the path of progress within the framework of the development of civilization, the resistance of conservative forces, which, as a rule, make up the majority in any state, inevitably grows. And this, of course, slows down the movement along the path of progress. But the movement continues, corrected by these same conservative forces.

Comrade Stalin was just in a hurry. He believed that if all these conservatives, whom he called differently at different times, were isolated or destroyed, then the country would begin a rapid movement along the path of progress. At the same time, he was in such a hurry that he did not notice how his train, rushing to the commune, was transferred by clever switchmen to the track leading to the abyss.

Luckily for everyone, this train went downhill before it even reached the abyss; and long before this, Comrade Stalin himself was thrown out of the cab onto the rails at full speed. That was the practice, because no one knew the theory. And those who spoke loudly that they knew everything were taken to be shot immediately so as not to interfere with the rapid movement of Soviet society towards a great goal.

There was an awkward pause after my answer regarding the fate of the dissertation. Apparently, they got wind of something about her, and this, combined with the fables going around about me, made them believe that it was in my dissertation that one could find a panacea for all the troubles of today

day.

"Vasily Lukich," the president broke the silence, "are you going to go to the polls?"

"If I live, I will definitely go," I promised.

"And who are you going to vote for?" Korzhakov asked.

"For Mavrodi," I answered without a shadow of a smile.

The President, who had just handed me a red box and called me, like the ballerina Plisetskaya, "Great Russia", was clearly counting on a different answer.

"For Mavrodi? he asked. "Are you also one of the deceived investors who invested in this "MeMeMe" of his?"

"Military pensioners, which I am, do not have extra money to risk them," I assured, "and I will go to vote for him so as not to vote for anyone else. Let Mavrodi be pleased to remember in his old age that at least someone voted for him in the presidential elections. Moreover, he will have to remember this, for sure, in prison."

"It's always like this, you know," the president muttered displeasedly, "you only do good things for people, but they still strive to bite you and vote either for Zyuganov or for this Jew ... How is he?"

"Zhirinovsky?" Korzhakov suggested.

"Not," the president recalled, "for Yavlinsky. Or there for some Govorukhin. I understand, Vasily Lukich, that you are joking. But we, you know, are not in the mood for jokes. Until June 16, there is very little left to deal with everyone."

"There is one thing I do not understand yet," I answered, "how can I be of service to you? Maybe someone should be arrested?"

"In! the president exclaimed. — Learn, Korzhakov! What does a real school mean? Look how he thinks!"

The President did not hide his admiration so much that I would not be surprised to see in his hands another order for my person.

"No," said Yeltsin, whose mood was clearly elevated, "of course, there is no need to arrest anyone, dear Vasily Lukich. Bye. But you, as a specialist, do not think that a conspiracy is taking place in our country at the present time."

"You mean those," I asked, "who, united around Zyuganov, call themselves communists?"

"Well, let's say, you understand," the president replied evasively, "let's say I mean exactly them. What would you do in my place?"

"Without any hesitation," I replied, "I would ban them and disperse them. And once again I would send the leaders to catch their breath in Matrosskaya Tishina.

The President sighed and shook his head.

"You are not a democrat, Vasily Lukich," he said reproachfully. - It is immediately clear that your entire conscious life fell on the era of the most cruel totalitarianism. your methods were

good then, but not good now.”

“No,” I objected, “excuse me, Boris Nikolayevich, but you and I went through the same school of democracy—the school of democratic centralism. And she teaches: “if the enemy does not surrender”, what is done with him? That's right: “destroy”, like the previous Supreme Council. It is possible with the help of tanks, but it is possible without.”

“Well, you're just some kind of poet,” Yeltsin muttered, “a poet of totalitarianism. And democracy, by the way, provides for the widest political spectrum in the country, you know, from the extreme left to the extreme right. This is democracy. President Bush also explained to me.”

“Especially when there is no center,” I suggested, “and the whole democracy consists of the extreme left and the extreme right, which, by the way, have long united and are only waiting in the wings to hang you on the gallows with great pleasure. This is their common program, which, it would seem, leaves you with only one way out - to strike a preemptive strike on them before it's too late. But you don't. Why?”

“How can I do this? – the President threw up his hands, – in the conditions of our democratic society and market economy?”

“As a guarantor of the constitution,” I prompted, “of course, I do not mean the establishment of the same constitutional order throughout the country as, say, they are establishing in Chechnya. Not at all. In general, I propose to look at the whole problem differently. From a different, so to speak, angle of view.”

The President wanted to say something, but I stopped him with an imperious movement of my hand.

I developed this gesture over the course of many years of service, when I had to interrupt the “presentation of innocence” of interrogators. It also affected the president, because he kept silent.

“There is a completely legal existence in the country,” I continued, “a political group that calls itself the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. At one time, only for a timid attempt to create such a party, Comrade Stalin ruthlessly shot the entire Leningrad regional committee and city committee of the CPSU (b). Everyone believes that he did this only because he was a bloody killer and a maniac. Not at all. He was well aware that the creation of such a party would mean the end of the CPSU (b) as an all-Union party and this would lead to the disintegration of the country. As soon as the repressive measures eased, these separatists stirred again. The tone was set by various small parties from the level of regional committee instructors, secretaries of various small district committees to instructors who sat in their places and heads of sectors in the Central Committee.

The creation of the RCP gave them the opportunity to be catapulted from a state-owned stool in some district committee, or even in a shop party bureau, into the seat of a member of the new Politburo and Central Committee.

Of course, this trend was noticed by the enemy and encouraged in every possible way. Internal tension grew also because, of course, during the so-called “stagnation years” there were actually no movements in the upper echelons of the party nomenklatura. You probably know this better than I do.

When the last General Secretary Gorbachev began his perestroika, he opened the way not only for glasnost and democracy. Under the guise of reproduction, as they called it then, “democratic informals”, the Communist Party of Russia immediately arose, which no one could interfere with. The appearance of this party, which the then Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov aptly called the “party of hardware lumpen,” weakened the CPSU and strengthened the communist parties of the union republics, stuffed with separatists, so much that the CPSU collapsed and collapsed

together with the Soviet Union, and the overjoyed RCP quickly declared itself its successor.

Of course, you remember, dear Boris Nikolaevich, how this, pardon the expression, "party" behaved when you already became president? Zyuganov openly supported the GKChP in August 1991 and escaped with a slight fright, because your decree banned the CPSU, not the RCP. Zyuganov and his company became the main instigator of the events of the ninety-third year, deftly using the hopeless stupidity of Khazbulatov and Rutskoy. After the suppression of this coup, as far as I remember, you banned the RCP, but it arose under the name of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

After sitting in the cracks for a while and making sure that they were absolutely not in danger, Zyuganov's "party" began open subversive and anti-state activities, turning before our eyes into a National Socialist - not even a party, but a grouping. From the old she had only paraphernalia. This party also included the remnants of the amnestied GKChP: General Varennikov, who, if you have not forgotten, sent directives through all channels in 1991, demanding your immediate arrest and execution on the spot, your "old friend" Lukyanov, for whom the only meaning of life is only the settling of personal accounts with you. I'm not saying that Kryuchkov also warmed up there - a man, perhaps not very smart, but, you see, superbly informed. In the shadow of Zyuganov's "party", such generals as Makashov, Achalov, Sterligov and many others rub against each other, whom you don't need much to introduce.

I understand that all this would be nonsense of no great importance for a person like you, Boris Nikolayevich, in whose hands all state power is concentrated: the army, the FSB, the treasury and the support of powerful regional elites, led by former secretaries of regional committees, looking at Zyuganov - yesterday's unknown instructor of the Central Committee, whose ceiling of thinking is at the level of the Zhek party cell - with a mixture of poorly concealed contempt and bewilderment.

But the crux of the matter lies elsewhere. The system in operation in the country after 1917 was essentially a slave system. And without going into details, she, as it should be under Platonic socialism, divided the whole society into slave owners, overseers and slaves.

You, Boris Nikolaevich, having decided to create a free society in Russia for the first time in a thousand years, persuaded the highest nobility in the person of the secretaries of regional committees and city committees to stand under your banner. But you did not take into account the huge number of small slave traders who reveled in their power and easy bread in the factory, army, institute and shop party committees, who filled the offices of the huge buildings of the KGB, the party and the Komsomol, who sat as small planters in rural district committees and village councils. These people do not know how to work in a free society, they are not capable of doing any useful work, and for them the changes in our society mean death not only from longing for the past, but also from hunger. Therefore, they will do everything possible to push Russia back.

The trouble is, there are a lot of them. That is why the Zyuganov group has accomplices everywhere: in the army, in the security service, in industry, in agriculture, in literature and art, in the press. In a word, everywhere, because the CPSU and the KGB were all-penetrating structures.

The main task for them now is to topple you and your allies, seize power in the country and - and this will happen inevitably if they win the elections - by any means to regain the territories of the former USSR. And this will destroy Russia just as they destroyed the USSR.

Look around you, dear President, don't you see a conspiracy that is being carried out absolutely openly.

Zyuganov's accomplice General Dudayev raises a rebellion in Chechnya. You throw an army there, but Zyuganov's accomplices in the Ministry of Defense are conducting this operation in such a way as not to defeat the rebels, but to exterminate as many of their own soldiers as possible and shove as much state money into their pockets as possible. Zyuganov's accomplices in the FSB have made the army and the country blind and deaf. In Chechnya, they expose the army to sudden attacks by the rebels, they have opened all the cities and villages of Russia, including Moscow, to attack.

Zyuganov's accomplices are providing you, Boris Nikolayevich, with absurd nonsense, which by and large cannot even be called disinformation, exposing you to the ridicule of the whole world. Remember at least the famous "38 snipers" during the events in Pervomaisky.

Zyuganov's accomplices in the army, the FSB, among the "red directors" in industry, supply Dudayev with the latest equipment that is not yet in the army, they send him everything - from uniforms to the best medicines, the names of which our military doctors have not even heard. The same accomplices from the "red directors" do not pay their workers wages, spinning money in commercial structures or simply pocketing it.

This raises a wave of popular indignation, when people are ready to follow anyone in order to save their families from starvation.

At the same time, the state television channels and a good half of the press daily inflate nostalgia for the "good old days", when vodka cost three rubles and sausage - no more, if it was possible to intercept it with a fight somewhere. Isn't this a conspiracy?

Can a party legally exist that has openly proclaimed its task to overthrow the existing political system in the country, that openly does not recognize the constitution, sabotages all decisions of the government, when even the chairman of the Duma security committee, openly engaged in subversive activities.

I have served in state security all my life and I can guarantee that under Zyuganov's "party" there is already a secret Extraordinary Commission, consisting of former party organizers and retired KGB officers, who pronounce and execute death sentences on those who, in the current conditions, can demonstrate an example of success in the field of entrepreneurship, in banking, in the administration of new structures, and so on. At the same time, everything is attributed to some kind of abstract mafia or unknown criminal groups.

"And what do you say," asked Korzhakov, who was listening to me, biting his lips, "about their latest trick with the denunciation of the Belovezhskaya Accords? Why did they need it?"

"In the old days," I explained, "when some poet was caught writing a famous Russian word on the wall of the Bolshoi Theater, he was also asked the question: why did he do it. And since he, of course, could not answer, they usually wrote in the protocol: "out of hooligan motives." So this decision was adopted by the Zyuganovites out of hooligan motives. Since the inaction of the authorities daily adds to their impudence, and they are not able to do anything useful, they begin to act as hooligans. Pay attention, as soon as you move your eyebrows, Boris Nikolayevich, they immediately turn from arrogant victors into justifying petty dirty tricks.

"But I can't disperse the Duma before the elections," the president remarked grimly, "and Zyuganov has parliamentary immunity."

"All this is done in an elementary simple way," I laughed, although I understood that this should not have been done. "It's even strange to explain such simple things to you. His people," I pointed to Korzhakov, "are raiding the headquarters of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation in Moscow or in any province, or both there and there. I assure you that you will find a lot of interesting things there: hit lists, documents proving connections with foreign countries like Cuba, North Korea or Iraq, criminal sources of funding from gambling to outright treason. All this is published, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation is banned, its faction in the Duma is therefore declared dissolved. By the way, you have already been informed that the Zyuganovites in the Duma put on badges with the inscription "People's Deputy of the RSFSR." Such a state does not exist now, so they actually deny their Russian citizenship."

"They will go underground, you know," the president muttered, "there will be even more trouble."

"Underground! - I, no longer embarrassed, laughed even more. What underground? Remember how they sat underground after the putsch of 1993? This underground is easily calculated by the amount of upholstered furniture and Romanian bedroom sets taken there. Therefore, I can honestly tell you, comrades, that only rats can be found in the underground!

But we digress," I continued in a fit of lecturer's inspiration. "So I would like to ask: why is such a group allowed to exist legally?"

"Excuse me, Vasily Lukich," said Korzhakov, "but you are hopelessly behind the times. We live in a democracy. There is a normal democratic process going on... And what you are offering us, excuse me, is a thing of the past."

"Gentlemen, comrades," I replied, "I had to learn the art of political intrigue from Ilyich himself. And Comrade Stalin, too, believe me, was not a bastard. And just everything you are talking about is sewn with white threads. Forgive me, old man, for my bluntness, dear president, but isn't it clear that if it weren't for Zyuganov, your chances of being elected for a second term would be zero. Here they are with Zhirinovsky and work off their budgetary salary, which, perhaps, only they are paid on time.

All this is so. But beware - the situation can very easily get out of your control under the current circumstances. Do not outsmart yourself, as Comrade Menzhinsky used to say."

"Oh, veterans," said the President, standing up. "All of you, you understand, conspiracies and upheavals from your fighting youth."

He shook his big fist.

"Here they are all where I have!"

"Don't drop it," I remarked respectfully.

"What?" the president didn't understand, but realizing, he smiled one of his famous smiles, which I unambiguously deciphered: "If I drop it, everyone's heads will fly off, you understand. I don't like joking."

"It was then that I realized from his eyes," Lukich smiled, "that democracy also has positive aspects. If I had such rights, I would have awarded him this Order "For Personal Courage". Risk man, I tell you!

## AFTERWORD



"Vasily Lukich," I said, giving my voice as much optimism as possible, "you have to!

— What else happened? the veteran asked warily.

"There was a man," I announced joyfully, "who agreed to publish your memoirs!"

- Isn't he crazy? Lukich asked.

"No," I assured him, "during the years of Soviet power, he rewound his sentence for anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation. During a search, Brodsky's poems were found in his hiding place and they were imprisoned for five years for this. After being released from the zone by Gorbachev and declaring freedom of the press, he decided to become a publisher and promised himself to print only the memoirs of the Chekists. Away from sin. After reading the manuscript, he was delighted, considering your stories a triumph of resurgent socialist realism.

"Of course," agreed Vasily Lukich, "I only have the truth there, albeit slightly embellished." As it should be in socialist realism.

"Once," the veteran continued, "the writers invited Comrade Stalin to their congress and asked him for instructions on how to cover certain events. The leader thought and said: "Write the truth. But not the whole truth." This is social realism. If I wrote the whole truth, even you would not believe it. And as I have written, everything is true, and most importantly - intelligible for the average reader.

"The publisher said the same word for word as you," I was delighted, "he called the main advantages of your memoirs historical accuracy combined with the beauty of literary presentation. He immediately drew attention to the fact that the book was not intended for aesthetic goons, but for an ordinary person from the street. "This Chekist," he said, "came out of a Gogol overcoat, like all realists. Both critical and socialist. And he offered to release your memoirs under the general title "James Bond from the NKVD." How are you?

"Well, no," protested Vasily Lukich, "what kind of James Bond am I? He only did that he wet people and slept with all the girls that came across his arm. And I didn't kill a single person in my entire service and firmly adhered to the rule: "Do not live where ..."

"I know, I know," I interrupted him, "yes, you are right... James Bond is not very successful. Morally, his moral level is, of course, very low.

"And no spirituality," added Lukich, "no, come up with something else."

- Well, how would you react, Lukich, - I asked, - if we call your book "D'Artagnan from the NKVD"? Is it okay?

— D'Artagnan? - Lukich muttered displeasedly, although much less protest was heard in his voice, - he was a painfully cocky cockerel, he always grabbed his service weapon, hooligans in the city, fought with patrols, took bribes ...

"But he knew the service," I stood up for the famous Gascon.

- He knew the service, of course, - Vasily Lukich confirmed, - he served in the personal guard of the king. We can say, in the security service of the head of state. And in the guards they rotted, and they put them in the war, and they stuffed them into prison-zones as commandants, and if you need to take anyone

there were, they were also sent, the royal musketeers.

"Exactly," I exulted, "D'Artagnan has arrested as many people for his service as you, Lukich. Do you remember, he was already quite old, but it was he who was instructed by the king to take and take the first minister Fouquet to the temporary detention center? Just like under Comrade Stalin. And as for the fights with the cardinal's guards, tell me, Lukich, in all honesty, have you never, in your youth, had to fight in some restaurant with the cops or the bigwigs that guard the mausoleum?"

"Everything has happened..." Lukich admitted, "when there are no brains, then what doesn't happen."

What were you fighting for? I inquired.

"From arrogance," Lukich blushed, "whose service is more important, they found out ... But more often because of the girls.

"You see," I rejoiced, "just like D'Artagnan—for honor and for a lady.

"I'll tell you more," Lukich laughed, "once I had to secretly deliver Galina Brezhneva's diamond pendants to Moscow in order to avoid a terrible scandal at the plenum of the Central Committee. The whole service of Andropov caught me along with the Shchelokov cops.

- And what? I opened my mouth in surprise.

"They didn't," Lukich replied modestly.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" I almost got angry.

"There is a time for everything," Vassily Lukich reassured me. "When the time comes, I'll tell you.

"Well, you're the spitting image of D'Artagnan," I declared with conviction. - He carried pendants to the "princess of the blood", guarded Lenin in the zone, arrested Kim Il Sung. Yes, you even surpassed D'Artagnan in dashing. We are with you, Lukich, we will do three continuations of the book, as in Dumas - "Twenty years later", "Ten years later".

"I just didn't become a marshal, like D'Artagnan," Lukich sighed.

"But the marshals trembled before you when you conducted a search at their dachas," I reminded Lukich.

"That's for sure," agreed Lukich, "they were still trembling!"

And he and I decided to call the book "D'Artagnan from the NKVD." If we are to revive social realism, then the only way.

St. Petersburg, winter-spring 1996

Notes

BUR - a high-security barrack in the zone (in the camp). (ed.)

2

Port wine "777", or in the people - "three sevens", the best port wine in the USSR. (ed.)

3

Kazakhs at that time were called "dzhambuls" behind their backs due to the fact that at school in the lower grades at that time they learned by heart the verse of the Kazakh poet "Listen to the children of akyn Dzhambul ..." Akyn in Kazakh is a poet. (ed.)

4

Anthem of the Nakhimovites. (ed.)

5

In 40 years, N.A. Cherkashin will repeat this phrase on the pages of "Sea Collection" No. 6 for 1995. (aut.)

6

Yeltsin B.N. - the first president of the Russian Federation (1991-1999). (ed.)